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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

A PLOT WITHIN A PALACE

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A PLOT WITHIN A PALACE

OR,

NICK CARTER'S ROYAL CLIENT.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

NICK CARTER'S ROYAL CLIENT.

"I believe, sir, that I have the honor of addressing Mr. Nicholas Carter?"

The man who asked the question was a distinguished appearing gentleman at the meridian of life, who bowed with courtly grace when he put the question, and whose smile revealed as plainly as words could have done that he was well aware that he had made no mistake. And the detective, who was seated alone at a table in the dining-room of the Holland House, looked up and smiled in acknowledgment, replying at the same time:

"You are quite correct, sir. Will you be seated, prince? Your Highness does me——"

"Hush!—if you please, Mr. Carter. Pardon me. Yes, thank you, I will occupy this chair opposite you for a few moments, if I may. I was not aware that you knew me, Mr. Carter. It is my first visit to your country, although I flatter myself that I speak your language quite well."

"You do, indeed. I recognized you at once, sir; the moment I raised my eyes to your face. I have several times visited your own country, and, although I have never had the honor of a presentation to you, I have seen you several times, and I once had the honor of assisting you to your carriage under rather trying circumstances."

The detective smiled as he made this last statement, while the prince raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"I am sure, Mr. Carter," he said, "that you can refer to but one occasion—one when I so nearly fell a victim to a plot of assassination that was intended for my—for an august relative of mine?"

"Yes," replied the detective.

"Then I owe my life to you, and have owed it to you all these years without knowing to whom I was indebted for the service you rendered me then."

"It was a simple service, sir, that I would have as readily performed for any man. In fact, I did not know at the moment whose life it was that was endangered."

"Then I thank you twice over, Mr. Carter, for the

service you rendered the man, and not"—he glanced furtively around him and added in a low tone—"the prince."

"And be assured, sir, that you are twice welcome. Will you tell me, if you please, how I may address you, since you choose to ignore your titles?"

"I am registered at this hotel under the name of Rupert Biron. Both names are among the many that were given me at my baptism, so I do not feel that I am exactly traveling under false colors."

"And do you prefer to be addressed as plain Mr. Biron?"

"Yes; or you may call me Rupert, if you prefer it. It is the name that was always given to me in the privacy of family life, at the pal—at my home, you know. It may strike you as being rather too familiar and intimate, Mr. Carter, but it will not impress me so at all."

"Thank you, sir; but allow me to suggest that if I am to assume terms of such familiarity with you, it is only fair that you should respond in kind. If we are to pose as intimates, and you become Rupert to me, I should be no less than Nicholas, or Nick, to you."

"Agreed!" exclaimed the prince, laughing heartily, and extending his hand across the table toward the detective; and Nick responded with equal heartiness.

"The waiter is approaching us, Rupert. What shall I order for you?"

"A glass of port only, thank you. I have dined."

"Have you been long in New York?" Nick asked, when the waiter had departed with the order.

"Since yesterday morning."

"And you intend remaining with us some time?"

"That depends, Nicholas, upon yourself," was the strange reply.

"Upon me?" asked the detective, in surprise.

"Exactly."

"Then I am to assume that your business here is with me?"

"Precisely."

"You astonish me! And you have been here since yesterday morning?"

"Yes."

"It seems strange that I have not heard from you before now, then."

"I preferred to await you here—to encounter you by accident, if it could be done: if not, then to send you word by telephone. But I will be quite frank with you. My business in this country is solely to interview you, and, if possible, to secure your services."

"You may command my services at any time," responded the detective, glancing at the prince keenly; "and fortunately at the present moment I am quite free from engagements. That is to say, I have nothing on hand to which my assistants cannot attend as well as I. In what way can I serve you, sir?"

"It is rather a long story, Nicholas; one that should not be hurried in the telling; certainly it is one that should not be told here."

"Have you any objections, then, to going with me to my house? Or would you prefer to go to your own apartments in the hotel?"

"I should prefer your own house."

"Shall we go there at once?"

"If it is not too late; and if you have quite finished with your dinner."

"Quite."

"I have no idea that I have been followed to this country; in fact, there is apparently no reason why I should have been followed; but the fact that you recognized me instantly is sufficient warning that others may do the same. I should like to keep the fact of our conference as much a secret as possible."

"Oh, we can do that easily enough. Will you tell me how you recognized me so readily?" asked the detective.

The prince chuckled. Then he replied:

"The regular hotel detective here knows you by sight, quite well. This morning I asked him to be good enough to tell me if you entered the house, and a few moments ago he came to me with the information that you were dining here."

"It is your idea, I suppose, to return to—to your own country, as soon as possible?"

"Yes; and to take you back with me, Nicholas. That is why I am here."

"Oh!" Nick was thoughtful for a moment, smiling to himself, so that presently the prince inquired:

"Won't you tell me what there was in that last remark of mine that seems to amuse you?"

"Certainly, sir, if you will promise not to be offended at my audacity."

"I think I can assure you of that much, Nicholas."

"I was thinking of a certain member of your own family—of a certain young lady who has the honor to be your niece; of a certain princess who was, when I

last saw her, the most attractively beautiful young woman I had ever seen. I was thinking of a strange encounter I had with her personally, and of what she said to me at the time, and the recollection brought the smile to my face."

"You refer to Deehra?"

"Yes."

"It is concerning her that I am come to see you, Nicholas."

"What? Really?"

"Yes."

"She is not in trouble, I hope?"

"I do not know. I would rather not anticipate what I have to tell you. But it is solely on her account that I am here. Deehra has always been rather headstrong, as you doubtless may have heard. She has never been content under the restraint necessarily imposed upon one in her exalted position. She has ever chafed under the leash of court etiquette and rebelled at the conventional boundaries of her personal liberty."

"Yes; I have been so informed, I think."

"As soon as we are in the privacy of your own quarters, Nicholas, I will tell you all about it; but for the moment I will content myself with saying that Deehra [illegible] Missing."

"Missing?"

"She has disappeared, and under circumstances that are so puzzling as to leave us entirely in doubt whether she has been a party to the disappearance or not. That is why I have come to you."

"But to disappear! One situated as she was? It seems incredible."

"Of course, you must understand that the fact is not known. It has not gone beyond the walls of the palace, and is not even known within them, save to a very few—a very few, indeed. We want you to find her, Nicholas. That is why I am here. It is why I wish to take you back with me. I have the authority of the—of her father, to make whatever terms with you that please you. If you have met her personally, as your words but now implied, you know what a splendid creature she was and, I hope, is. You know that she was as good as beautiful, and as much a princess as a woman, or vice versa. I believe that we can rely upon your aid."

"Indeed, you may; you could do that certainly, but all the more because of Deehra."

"Shall we go now?"

"Yes."

"In your own house, where we are secure from interruption, I will tell you the entire story."

"Very well, sir. Come."

CHAPTER II.

THE VANISHING OF A PRINCESS.

Seated in the privacy of Nick Carter's study, the prince began the story he had to tell.

"Deehra, if she is living, which Heaven grant I may not doubt, will be twenty-one years old on her next birthday," Prince Rupert began. "She should have been betrothed to one of the princes of Europe long ago if it had not been for her independence of spirit, which absolutely refused to give her hand without her heart. She has twice refused a crown; twice also she has declined an alliance which would have brought her a crown later on."

"She certainly has shown herself independent," remarked the detective.

"More than that; she has manifested her ability to carry her point, even against the will of her father, who is adamant to everybody else, but who has been as wet clay in her hands."

"Well?"

"For reasons of state, a brilliant alliance has been sought for her. As I have already said, two separate ones have been arranged, only to have her decline them in words and terms which there was no mistaking. One of these incidents has occasioned strained relations between my country and that of the royal suitor, for I believe that he was really in love with my niece's beautiful face."

"And so——"

"And, therefore, relations that might be called strained also grew up within the walls of the palace. The king adopted the policy of ignoring his daughter; of treating her coolly, and of manifesting his displeasure by refusing to have anything to say to her, or to do with her."

"That was a mistake."

"Certainly; and it resulted seriously, as you shall see. Deehra adored her father. To her he is not a king; he is only a man and her father. His resentment against her, therefore, cut her most cruelly, at first. I have been told that she passed hours in her own apartments, after excluding her attendants, where she was supposed to be

weeping. Later her feelings underwent a change, from sorrow to anger. She came to me, then."

"Ah? Indeed."

"She talked rather wildly at that time, but also very much to the point. She insisted that it was not her fault that she was born a princess, that her father was a king, and that she was sought in marriage by a lot of puppets who wore diadems on their brows. I think I am quoting her correctly."

"It sounds about as I should suppose she would speak."

"She referred to the last suitor she had refused in not very complimentary terms. She told me that she would die an old maid before she would wed with such a man as he is. I ventured the suggestion that I could see no personal objections to him; that he is young, and the possessor of many attractions, and all that; but she would have none of it, and she recited to me a list of her objections to him which would have made you smile could you have heard them, and which would have made me laugh in her face at the time, had I not realized that she was in deadly earnest, and meant every word she said.

"This was at a time when she was supposed to be holding the matter under consideration, the king having refused to take her refusal as final, and believing that she could be forced to change her mind.

"I saw very plainly that it could never be. Indeed, Deehra, in her anger, asserted boldly to me that she would take her own life at the altar rather than wed with the man of her father's choice.

"The upshot of it was that I went to my brother and told him as frankly as Deehra had told it to me, that it was no use; that Deehra could not be forced into a marriage against her will—and all that. Well, the matter was dropped, and, as I say, resulted in strained relations between the two countries. The young king to whom I have referred has since formed another alliance, quite satisfactory to himself, to be sure; but he has not forgotten the affront he received from us, and I don't believe he ever will."

"Pardon me, Rupert, but that part of your story does not interest me. I wish to know about the princess herself."

"I am coming to that; but I deem it best for your thorough understanding of the matter that I dwell, in passing, upon these apparently side issues."

"As you please."

"Since that time there have been three other advantageous offers for her hand, and she has peremptorily declined them all with the same final air, that—well, that offers no opportunity for argument. It was the last refusal of hers that sent her father again into the sulks against her—and that has resulted in her disappearance."

"I don't think that I quite understand that last remark of yours."

"Well, possibly it is unfair to say that it exactly resulted in her disappearance, but I cannot disabuse my mind of the idea that it had much to do with it."

"How so?"

"Her father, the king, utterly refused to speak to her at all. He would not reply to her when she addressed him. He ignored her as if she were not in his presence at all, never permitted his eyes to rest upon her, looked over her, or past her, or through her, without seeing her, and offered not the faintest recognition to any salute she made him. She loves her father and she could not bear it."

"Naturally not."

"The result of it all is that she is missing. Now, do you understand me?"

"Yes. How long a time has she been missing?"

"A month at the time I started to come here to you; approximately six weeks now."

"You have come to me to secure my services in the effort to find her, with the consent and also the desire of your brother—her father?"

"Yes."

"He is now, I am to understand, inclined to overlook her rebelling against his wishes?"

"He will overlook everything, she shall marry whom she pleases, and refuse whom she pleases, if only she can be returned to him. His love for her is greater than his ambitions for her or his family."

"Good! That sounds as if the king had come to his senses concerning her."

"He has; although I should not advise you to express those sentiments to him in exactly those terms."

"If I have occasion to express them to him at all, prince," replied the detective coldly, "it will be in precisely those terms."

"All right. The point is that she must be found; or, at least, it must be known what has become of her."

"What do you fear? No; wait a moment. What does the king fear concerning her?"

"That she has committed suicide."

"Does he really think that?"

"No; he fears it."

"But if she had done such a thing as that, there would be some evidence of it somewhere, would there not?"

"It would seem so."

"I am to understand that she left no sort of letter behind her?"

"She left nothing at all."

"Her maids and attendants know nothing of her departure?"

"Nothing?"

"Is not one of them missing with her?"

"No."

"Has inquiry been made to discover if any of her personal effects, such as clothing, for example, are also missing?"

"Yes; nothing is missing."

"Her jewels? What of them?"

"They are intact—save only for what she was known to be wearing at the time of her disappearance."

"Where did she disappear from?"

"Her own private apartments."

"In the palace at Breslin?"

"Yes."

"At what time did she disappear? At what hour of the twenty-four, I mean?"

"Between eleven in the evening and six in the morning."

"She was known to have gone to her apartments before eleven?"

"At eleven—yes."

"Who attended her, in retiring, that night?"

"Nobody. She dismissed all her maids and attendants. She would have none of them with her. Her father had just publicly ignored her. It had cut her deeply."

"Tell me about that scene—if there was one."

"A special reception was given that evening to an admiral of your own navy, and to a few selected guests who had been invited to meet him. It was rather an informal affair, especially for our court, where etiquette is usually so rigidly observed. Deehra entered the room somewhat late—almost, it seemed to me, as if she intended and wished to call especial attention to her entrance. She advanced directly to her father and curtsied, attempting at the same time to kiss his hand. He withdrew the hand and turned his side toward her, at the same time conducting himself exactly as if he had not seen her, and did not know that she was there. In fact, he continued his conversation with the Admiral, as if the princess had not approached them, and thus compelled the Admiral to appear to ignore her, also, although I will say that he speedily turned away from the king and bowed to her.

"A hush fell upon the entire company. It was a slight which was unmistakable.

"Deehra flushed hotly, then turned away haughtily with her head in the air, and with a disdainful shrug of her shoulders, entered into conversation with others in the room, as if nothing had happened.

"After a little, the Admiral sought an opportunity and approached her. She received him precisely as if she had not seen him before that evening, and was especially gracious to him, as if to show him that she did not hold him responsible for the apparent slight to her at the time she sought to salute the king.

"But she remained only a short time.

"At a few minutes before eleven she withdrew; but again, as etiquette demanded she should do, she sought the king to crave his permission to retire.

"Again he pointedly ignored her, refusing to see her, to hear her, or to speak to her, or look at her.

"She was very pale when she finally departed from the room, and those who remarked her, and who know her well, thought at the time that she was not one to submit tamely to such treatment. She has too much the spirit of her father for that."

"So I supposed. It was then, was it, when she went to her own apartments, and was not seen again?"

"Yes."

"And now, Prince Rupert, what is your own individual opinion as to what became of her?"

"I don't know."

"But you have an opinion, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Pray, let me hear it, then."

CHAPTER III.

A MYSTERY OF A PRINCESS.

"I am not sure that it would be correct to call it an opinion," said the prince. "It is rather an idea, based upon some things that I know about my beautiful niece,

and calculating what she would do under given circumstances from that knowledge."

"I understand you."

"As I have already told you, Deehra was always impatient under the restraints of court life. It always palled upon her. She became at times heartily sick of it all, and I have often heard her wish aloud that she were a girl born to ordinary life, in order that she might go about among people, and live and be loved for her own sake alone."

"She was romantic?"

"No; not particularly. In referring to love, as I did just now, I did not refer to the love of men particularly. I meant more directly the love of friends, of companionship. A princess, situated as she always has been, has no friends, as the average young woman understands the term. And that was what galled Deehra always."

"Well?"

"Her one solace in her narrow environment was the love of her father and her love for him. When that failed her, she must have felt there was nothing left."

"I see."

"And it is my belief that she made up her mind on the instant, when he treated her publicly in the manner he did, that she would have no more of it. I believe, therefore, that she has merely gone out into the world to live as ordinary persons live, concealing her identity in some manner, and possibly earning her own living."

"Could she do that?"

"Why not? A girl of her spirit, with the education she has?"

"But her face, her features, her figure—everything about her is known from one end of your own country to the other. The subjects of her father know her by sight quite as well as they do him; and her pictures are everywhere."

"That is true enough; but, Nicholas, you must bear two things in mind."

"What are they?"

"First, that it is not known that she has left the palace, save to pass a sort of vacation at one of the many country estates of the king. It is not known that she is missing at all."

"Yes. And the other?"

"The other is based upon that one. No person would expect to encounter a royal princess, living at a boarding-house, or as a governess in a private family. It might be thought of such a one that she bore a remarkable resemblance to the princess—but that would be all. The likeness would be her surest safeguard against discovery."

"I don't know but you are right."

"Of course I am correct about it."

"And your idea, then, is that she is doing some such a thing?"

"Yes."

"Has it ever occurred to you that there might be another reason for her refusal of all suitors, and her determination to wed some one she loved?"

"Are you hinting at another love affair?"

"Yes."

"I have thought of it, but it is not to be considered."

"Why not?"

"Because whatever may be said of Deehra, she is inordinately proud. She would never bestow her affections, save where she could give them in honor."

"Granted; but she might form her own opinions concerning where that might be. Let me ask you a few questions bluntly."

"Anything that you may wish to ask I will answer."

"Have you ever known of the presence of any [illegible] man at court who has seemed to interest her more than ordinarily?"

"No. Positively not."

"You should know the symptoms of being in love, prince."

"I have undergone the malady a few times in my life."

"Have you never known the princess to manifest any of them?"

"I can't say that I ever have."

"Are you prepared to state to me that you are positive that she was not in love with another person, and with one whom she knew would not be acceptable to her father, the king?"

"Y-yes."

"You reply to that with some hesitation."

"I do it because I must admit that there have been times when I have asked myself that question; but I must also admit that I could never find a reason for replying to it in any other way than I have done."

"You don't, then, know of a man who might have been the object of her affections?"

"I certainly do not."

"I will change the subject. What efforts have been made to find her?"

"Almost none. Only those which could be prosecuted in secret. Even our own secret police have not been told that she is missing."

"I will repeat the question: What effort has been made to find her?"

"Captain Hensau, of my own personal staff, and a few of his brother officers, with myself, have made some personal effort to trace her, but without success."

"Of what have your efforts consisted?"

"I am afraid of little or nothing save to go about among those to whose homes she might have fled, and making cautious inquiries; also in visiting convents and nunneries, in which she might have concealed herself."

"You do not entertain the idea of suicide?"

"Not at all. It would be the last thing that she would be guilty of."

"You repudiate the idea of a lover?"

"Yes."

"And you cling to the one that you expressed: That she has gone out into the world to live as other people do, and incidentally to earn her own living?"

"Yes."

"Have you mentioned these ideas to the king?"

"I have."

"What does he think of them?"

"He regards them as folly. He insists that he broke her heart that night, by his brutal treatment of her before the roomful of guests."

"And her mother—what thinks she of the situation?"

"Ah! I had forgotten about that."

"Forgotten about what?"

"The queen—her mother."

"What about her?"

"She has not been told."

"Not been told that her favorite daughter is missing?"

"No."

"But the queen must know that the princess is mysteriously absent from the palace."

"Yes; but she has been told that it is by order of the king. She has been assured that Deehra has been sent away to undergo a period of punishment for her defiance of her father, and inasmuch as she thinks that Deehra deserves punishment, she is quite content with that explanation."

"Was she present at the time of the reception to the admiral?"

"Yes."

"Did she not resent the treatment to her daughter?"

"No; I think she quite approved of it."

"So, as a matter of fact, Deehra had no one to turn to."

"Only me."

"Did you sympathize with her?"

"Yes."

"Openly?"

"As much so as I dared."

"Did she know that you sympathized with her?"

"Certainly."

"As a result of that you should have been more or less in her confidence, I should suppose."

"I always thought I was, until now. And that very thing makes me believe at times that something may have happened to her."

"What could have happened to her?"

"Well, I have thought of this idea. I know that when she left the rooms in which the reception was held that night, she was storming within, although there was a smile on her face. I know that she was suffering because of the slight her father had put upon her, although her pride would not permit her to show it. It has occurred to me that she may have gone into the park to walk in the moonlight, and that something might have happened to her there."

"Do you mean the park of the palace-grounds?"

"Yes."

"What could have happened to her there?"

"I don't know."

"Are the grounds not guarded always?"

"They are never unguarded for a moment."

"Could she have gotten into the park from her own apartments, without being noticed by any of her attendants?"

"Yes; there is a way into the gardens, from her own room."

"Once in the gardens, then, could she have escaped entirely from the palace without the aid of a confederate?"

"I don't know. I have done it, when I was a youngster, and wished to go abroad without the knowledge of my father."

"How did you accomplish it?"

"I was spry and agile; moreover, I was a lad. I

watched my opportunity and got past them without being observed, and I returned in the same manner."

"You do not think she could have done that?"

"I don't know what to think. That is why I have traveled across the ocean to see you and to secure your services. I have told you all I know about the matter. Deehra has disappeared utterly; we have no idea what has become of her. We want you to find her, and do it without the knowledge getting abroad that she has been out of the palace for a moment."

"Very well. I will go back with you."

"Good! Can you start to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"There is a Cunard Line steamer sailing at one to-morrow. Will you take that, with me?"

"I will."

"Thank Heaven for that. I will send a cable message to the king to-night."

CHAPTER IV.

A BEAUTIFUL EAVESDROPPER.

Nick Carter had been two days at the palace of the king, and he was rapidly making up his mind that the solution of the mystery of the disappearance of the princess did not exist behind its walls, but must be searched for elsewhere.

He was introduced there as a guest of Prince Rupert, and under his guidance he had visited and inspected every part of the great building that he desired to see.

Particular attention had been given to the apartments of the princess herself, but it was all as unavailing and as fruitless of results as had been the questions that were asked in New York City.

The sum and substance of every inquiry was the same; that is, that the princess had disappeared within her own apartments at eleven o'clock on a certain night, had refused the attendance of any person upon her; had peremptorily ordered that none should approach her, or enter her rooms until summoned, and had with her own fair hands closed and locked the doors after her—and that she had not been seen since that hour.

There had not been a moment after she went inside the rooms when she could have passed along the corridors unseen, and therefore it was assumed that she had not come out of the apartments by that means.

There were three guards who patrolled the grounds of the garden and the park throughout the night, and it was not supposed that she could have gotten past them without being seen; there were guards outside the walls of the park, past whom it was supposed she could not have gone without discovery.

Again, it would have been equally impossible for an intruder to have entered the garden or the palace itself without being observed, and there seemed to be no explanation of the mystery.

If she had taken her own life, which the king thought for a time was the explanation of her disappearance, the only way in which she could have done it without leaving any trace behind her would have consisted in throwing herself into Diana's Pool, located in the center of the park.

But while Prince Rupert was in America the king had had the pool drained, on the pretense that it needed a thorough cleansing; not a trace of the princess was discovered.

It seems beyond belief that a royal princess could have disappeared as she did, with never a trace of any sort behind her; but here were the facts that the detective had to face.

He was greatly handicapped in making his inquiries by the secrecy which the household wished to maintain about the disappearance. Not for the half of his kingdom was the king willing that it should be known that she was missing.

Nick counted upon his fingers one evening the number and names of the persons with whom he might talk freely about it, and discovered that there were less than a dozen of them, all told, and of these there were two with whom the detective had thus far exchanged very few words, for the reason that he had wished an opportunity of conferring with each of them alone, and without the knowledge of the other.

These two were the princess' principal lady in waiting, a beautiful young woman from another court, who was known as the Countess Zita, and a young man attached to the suite of Prince Rupert, whose name was Count Herbert of Linmark. These two, Nick had learned, had been in the habit of being oftener alone in the princess' company than any others, and he was resolved to have a good talk with them before he left the palace, and as soon as an opportunity should offer.

It was the evening of the second day of his stay at

the palace, and the detective was alone in one of the smaller libraries, when the king entered unannounced.

"I have been seeking you, Mr. Carter," he said. "Prince Rupert told me that you were doubtless here, so instead of sending for you to attend upon me I came to you."

"That was kind of your majesty," replied Nick, bowing.

"Let there be as little formality between us as possible, when we are alone together," continued the king. "And now, tell me if you have discovered anything as yet which gives you assurance of success?"

"I am always assured in my own mind of ultimate success, sir," replied Nick, smiling.

"I wish that I might imbibe some of your confidence, then."

"I believe I may assure your majesty that it would be justified."

"You have found no trace of my daughter, have you?"

"No, sir; none as yet."

"Nor have determined how she got away from the palace, or was taken away?"

"Oh, yes. I have no doubt that she went away by the door that leads from her own private apartments to the garden; and from there she passed through the little door in the wall, to the open highway beyond it, by the aid of a key which always hung in one of the rooms of her own suite."

"But the key was still hanging there after she was missed, Mr. Carter."

"Which, sir, is only an added proof that the act of going was a premeditated one, and that she was prepared to execute it at any time when the decision should come to her. It is also a proof that either some one among her attendants let her out through the door in the wall that night and afterward returned the key to its place, or——"

"By Heaven, sir, if I find that to be the case, it will fare ill with whoever did it."

"I have no doubt of that."

"You were about to say something else, Mr. Carter."

"I was about to add this: Or that she had had an extra key made for her own use, so that the regular key would never be missed."

"You think that?"

"I feel quite sure of it."

"But why should she do such a thing?"

"Because her father, the king, made her unhappy by insisting that she should marry to suit his will and without regard to her own tastes, and because he went to the extent of slighting her in the presence of his guests—an affront which she was too proud to overlook."

"By Heaven, sir, you have a free tongue in your head."

"It was put in commission in a free country, sir. If you don't like the manner in which I use it, I can take it back with me to America at a moment's notice."

"I am not accustomed to being addressed in that manner, Mr. Carter."

"If your majesty asks me a question, as you did just now, you will receive only the plain truth in reply, no matter how disagreeable it may sound to your ears. The account of your last opportunity to speak with the princess, when you refused to do so, leaves no room for doubt that it was you who drove her from the palace, to whatever fate she chose to accept, rather than to remain here and submit to insult from her own father."

The king, who had dropped upon a chair, started to his feet with a half-oath of anger, and his hand came down upon a strike-bell on the table in front of him with a force that brought an attendant to him on the run.

But even before the attendant was inside the room the king had recovered himself, and he merely said:

"Bring a decanter of port and some cigars;" then, when they were alone again, he added: "You have a plain method of stating things which angers me, Mr. Carter. But I deserve all that you have said. I want you to find my daughter, not for me, the king, but for me, the father. I want you to find her and bring her to me, that I may beg her forgiveness for the wrong I did her. Can you do it?"

"I believe I can, sir."

"Do it, and my gratitude will be very great. Do it and I will bless you forever."

"I will do my best."

"You do not believe that anything serious has happened to her, do you?"

"I believe merely that she has done what thousands of others are doing every year—that is, she has run away from home."

"But where could she have gone?"

"Ah, that is different."

"She could not have escaped so thoroughly without assistance, do you think?"

"It does not appear probable."

"Who, in this palace, would dare to have offered her such assistance in the face of incurring my displeasure?"

"Your personal displeasure may not be such a terrible thing as you believe it to be; I, for instance, would not consider it a moment if it stood in the way of serving a young and beautiful woman."

"You are not a Carmanian, Mr. Carter."

"There are in the world some billions of others who are not Carmanians, either. Carmania is a very small country, indeed, in area, compared with the rest of the world, sir."

"But if, as you but now suggested, Deehra had already made plans for such an escape, as is included in your idea of that key, it must have occurred to her to run away from home, as you express it, long before I visited that slight upon her in the presence of the admiral."

"Very likely."

"Why should she have done that?"

"It was not the first time that you had offended her by ignoring her, was it, your majesty? It was not the only time?"

"No."

"You see, sir, she was prepared for you this time. She had doubtless said to herself that she would stand it no more; that if you repeated the offense she would go, and if she had so decided she made her preparations accordingly."

"But that presupposes that she had confederates, does it not?"

"It presupposes at least one."

"To go like that, in the middle of the night, unprotected—I cannot understand it."

"How do you know that she was unprotected, sir?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that there are usually many reasons why a girl leaves her home, and the most used one is—a man."

"Good Heaven! What do you mean? That my daughter—*mine*—would run away with a man?"

"Why not *your* daughter, as well as the daughters of other men? She was no better than hundreds of others who run away from their homes for love. The mere fact that she was and is a princess does not count where love is concerned. It is quite plain to me, sir, that the Princess Deehra was in love with a man beneath her in rank. I do not say that she went away *with* him, or even that she went *to* him; I do not even say that she has ever confessed her love to that man; but that she felt such a passion, I am as positive as that you are seated before me now, listening to what I say."

The king sat quite still, staring into the detective's face, but without seeing him; and he remained so for a long time, apparently speechless with amazement; but after a time he left his seat, and then without a word he moved across the room toward the door, opened it, and passed outside, closing it behind him, and never once turning back to indicate that he remembered the presence of the detective in the room. Nick was amazed.

"I wonder what in the world he meant by that?" the detective murmured, half to himself; and then he turned about in his chair sharply, for he heard a low, soft laugh near him; and he started to his feet, for, peering out upon him from a half-concealed station behind some curtains, he discovered the mischievously beautiful face of the Countess Zita.

CHAPTER V.

AN UNEXPECTED INTERRUPTION.

The detective had already been presented to this charming young woman, and had chatted with her twice. He had not, on either occasion, mentioned the subject of his business at the palace, for the reasons already given; but he was well aware that the countess knew perfectly well why he was there.

He was thinking rapidly while he rose to greet her properly.

He realized that she must already have been behind the curtains in the embrasure of the window, when he entered the room alone and seated himself in the comfortable chair to think.

Doubtless it had been pure mischievousness that had kept her silent at that time, and when a little later the king came into the room unannounced and engaged in the rather intimate conversation with the detective, she was naturally afraid to let her presence be known.

Nick could imagine the fear that she felt when she saw the king come in, for if she were discovered then, it would appear as if she had been alone there with the detective, and had hidden from his majesty in alarm when he approached.

Well, whatever her reasons for remaining quiet, she certainly had done so; she had avoided discovery by the king, and then, instead of remaining silent and permit-

ting her presence to remain unknown, she had deliberately warned the detective that she was there.

"Countess," he exclaimed, in mock alarm, as he approached her, "I am amazed. Don't pretend, now, that you were asleep when I entered the room, and that you have only just awakened. What would have been the consequences to yourself if the king had discovered you?"

"I should have been sent home; forbidden the palace. Think of it! Sent away in disgrace. What do you call it in your barbarian language? Oh, yes; I should have been 'fired.'"

"How is it that you did not let me know that you were here when I first entered the room, countess?" asked the detective, smiling, but nevertheless fixing a keen glance upon her.

"I will confess," she answered boldly, "that I wished the opportunity to study your face and manner when you did not know that you were observed."

"Indeed! Why?"

She smiled bewitchingly upon him, almost laughing in his face, and replied:

"As if you really thought I would answer that question!"

"Why not?"

"I am too wise, Monsieur Carter, even if I am only a girl in years."

She was still seated in the embrasure of the window, although she had swung half-way around toward him, permitting her daintily shod feet to hang from the window-seat half-way to the floor; and she kept tapping the heels of her boots against the wainscoting as if all the time she were mentally humming a tune and was keeping time to it with her feet.

She had drawn the curtains down in front of her and held them together under her chin, so that of her whole person only her piquant face with its bewitching black eyes and her feet were visible.

Nick studied her smilingly for a moment; then he said:

"Suppose the king were to return suddenly, now, and find you?"

"Pouf! He wouldn't find me. See!"

She whisked out of sight behind the curtains instantly, and Nick could hear her low laughter from her place of concealment.

Then she reappeared again, as suddenly as she had gone, and added:

"Besides, he won't return. No danger, after that parting shot you gave him."

"A parting shot that I gave him?" asked Nick. "What was that?"

"When you suggested that Deehra was in love with some one when she went away."

"Do you think, countess, that the suggestion disturbed him?"

"Disturbed him! Well, I should say so. That is the very thing that has been worrying him."

"The fear that she has run away with a man she loves?"

"Yes."

"Do you, countess, entertain that same fear?"

"Hoity-toity, monsieur! La-la, and all that! Is it my turn to be pumped dry of information, now?"

"Yes; if you have any to give."

"And if I have——"

"Possibly I can prevail upon you to let me have the benefit of it."

"Possibly; it is highly improbable, however, monsieur. Let me ask you: did you ever see the Princess Deehra?"

"Once—to speak with her."

"Well, what did you think of her?"

"I thought her the most charming young woman I had ever met—till then, countess."

"That was very prettily said—if I were fool enough to suppose that you intended it the way it sounded; but I am not. She was the most charming person you had ever met. Confess it, sir."

"If the rule that present company is always excepted in discussions holds good here, I must admit it."

"I did not know that Americans were given to paying compliments."

"They never utter meaningless ones, countess; but they are adepts in expressing deserved ones."

"Pshaw! Did you express your honest belief to the king when you told him that you thought Deehra to be in love?"

"I certainly did."

"With whom?"

"That is a question I had determined to ask of you, as soon as I had an opportunity to see you alone."

"Believing that I could tell you—if I would?"

"Yes."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because it is necessary that the princess should have had a confidant within the walls of the palace; because of all who are here you are the most likely one for that confidence; because, if I am at all a reader of character, you would delight in assisting at an intrigue of that kind; and because I believe you would be loyal to such a trust to the very end."

"Thank you. That tongue of yours is a wonder, Mr. Carter."

"Am I not correct?"

"About what, monsieur?"

"About what I have just said to you?"

"I have forgotten what it was."

"Shall I remind you again?"

"No; at least, not now. I suppose you really believe that you can find Deehra, don't you?"

"I am sure of it."

"And if you should succeed, what would be your method of procedure after that?"

"I don't think I understand you, countess."

"Would you betray her to the king?"

"That would depend."

"Upon what?"

"Upon what you would consider a betrayal."

"I mean, would you tell him where she could be found?"

"It seems to me just now that such a course would be my duty, countess."

"If it were a question of her happiness, what would be your course then, monsieur?"

"Countess, if you will permit me to venture the remark, you are making altogether too many suppositious conditions. I might answer them all at one time by saying that I don't know, any more than you do, what my course would be, and that I cannot know, without first talking with the princess herself."

"You are disposed to be her friend?"

"Certainly."

She gazed at him long and earnestly from her peephole between the curtains; and then of a sudden she burst out laughing.

"Really," she exclaimed, "I must have made you think that I know something of what has become of the princess; no?"

"You made me think that before I ever exchanged a word with you," replied the detective quietly.

"Indeed; how was that?"

"I think it was in your eyes—and your manner."

"Really? My eyes and my manner must be watched, if that is the case."

"Both would bear watching, just at the present moment. Really, countess, I tremble to think what the consequence might be if the king, or Prince Rupert, or—or—who shall I say? Count Herbert?—if one of them should enter this room suddenly now, and discover this scene. You would be sent home to your isolated castle, wherever it may be, and I would be packed off to America again forthwith—eh? Don't you think so?"

"I think it is quite true, what you say, as far as I am concerned; but, for you—oh, no! Do you know, Mr. Carter, you made me admire you immensely, a few moments ago."

"Did I? In what way?"

"By the way in which you bearded the king. There isn't another person within the borders of the kingdom to-day who would have dared to speak to him as you did; and if he had discovered me here and known that I overheard it——" An expression of comical horror came into her face that was very funny.

"You are very beautiful, countess," said Nick, half to himself, half to her, and watching her with unconcealed admiration.

"Thank you," she responded saucily. "I have heard that before. It is not original;" and she made a little face at him through the curtains.

Instantly he stepped quickly forward, and before she could dodge him had imprisoned the hand that held the curtains beneath her chin.

He held her so that she could not move; held her with his own face not more than a foot from hers; held her and looked into her mischievous black eyes, and upon her red lips so tantalizingly near.

She did not try to break away from him, nor to dodge. She returned gaze for gaze defiantly; and she managed to hold him with her eyes so that, although he was quite close to her, and her eyes and her lips both seemed to invite assault, he nevertheless drew no nearer.

After a moment of silence, she laughed softly.

"Do you—really—want to?" she asked mischievously; and she pursed up her lips in a most compelling manner.

Instantly he darted toward her, as if to take advantage of the opportunity thus offered, but in that instant there was a step outside the door, and the countess whisked

away from him and drew the curtains in front of her, just as he turned abruptly to face whoever it might be who was approaching.

As he turned Count Herbert of Linmark entered the room with a quick stride, and with an expression that was none too pleasant on his handsome face. He paused in the very center of the room, confronting the detective.

CHAPTER VI.

A KING, A CAD, AND A GENTLEMAN.

"The king commands your presence in his cabinet at once, Monsieur Carter," said the count haughtily, and managing to put a suggestion of insolence into the remark that unnecessarily stung the detective into making a retort; for he was instantly aware that by some method, at present unknown to him, Count Herbert was aware of the fact that Nick was not alone in the room. He knew, somehow, that the countess was concealed behind the curtains.

"You may return and say to the king that I will wait upon him presently," replied Nick, with quite as much insolence in his tone as the count had induced into his.

And then both men were startled by a peal of merry laughter from behind the curtains, which were instantly thrust aside, and the countess leaped out upon the floor and stood between the two men.

"Upon my word!" she exclaimed. "Will you hear the lordly gentlemen talk! 'The king commands your presence!' 'The king can wait!' La-la! In America, Herbert, from which country Mr. Carter comes, they are all kings."

"Save only the ladies, who are all queens," remarked Nick, bowing low.

Count Herbert, who was frowning heavily, and who seemed to be greatly enraged about something, stepped forward now and bowed low before the countess, with whom Nick could plainly see he was madly in love.

"It is unfortunate," he said, with icy incisiveness, "that I was compelled against my will to become a witness to a scene that was just enacted in this room. If you will take the trouble, countess, to glance into that mirror, from your former position between the curtains, you will observe that through that door which is partly ajar one may see along the corridor by which I was approaching. If terms of such intimacy can spring up between you in less than two days, I, who am a much older acquaintance, surely have the right."

With a quick move, before either the countess or Nick realized what the man had in mind, he took a step forward and seized the countess in his arms. Then, before she could resist him, he had drawn her quickly forward and planted a kiss squarely upon her lips.

Then, as he released her and started back, she uttered an exclamation of anger, and brought her right hand sharply around and in contact with his cheek, so that the slap might have been heard some distance away.

At the same instant Nick seized him by the arm and swung him around bodily, away from the countess, and with such force that he spun twice around before he came to a stop; and when he did so, he was livid with rage.

His right hand flew to the spot where his sword-hilt would have been, had he been in uniform and wearing the weapon; but it stopped there and fell to his side again, for in raising his eyes he had encountered the glance of the now thoroughly enraged countess.

Her black eyes had not been given to her for nothing. They were flaming and blazing now with the anger she felt over the manner in which the count had affronted her; and Nick knew instinctively that it was an affront which she would never forgive nor forget as long as she lived.

The count seemed to understand that much, also.

He had outraged her beyond the hope of forgiveness by that wanton act of kissing her on the lips, in Nick Carter's presence, as if she were one with whom liberties might be taken.

If the countess could be a siren in her tenderness and her witchery at one moment, she certainly gave ample evidence now that she could also become a veritable tigress on occasion.

For a moment she looked at him without speaking. Then she slowly raised one hand and pointed toward the door.

"Go, Count von Linmark!" she commanded, in a low, tense tone.

Instantly he seemed to recover himself. A smile that was almost a sneer showed itself on his features, and he bowed to both of them mockingly.

"This American—gentleman—who has succeeded in winning the favor of the Countess Zita so quickly shall hear from me again," he ground out between his teeth.

"And you, countess, who bestow your charms so promiscuously upon any man who——"

He got no further than that.

With one quick step forward Nick Carter seized him and slapped him forcibly across the mouth, forcing the words that he would have uttered back before they could be pronounced; and then, when the count would have struggled, Nick whirled him about and propelled him by his shoulders swiftly toward the doorway and through it; and then, with a last shove, he sent him scurrying along the corridor, while he himself returned calmly to the room, closing the door after him.

"Thank you," said the countess composedly, although her eyes were still flashing and her bosom was heaving with the anger she felt. "It seems that an American gentleman knows quite well how to handle a Carmanian cad."

"It was an unfortunate circumstance, countess, and was entirely my own fault," said the detective. "Believe me, I am very sorry to have been the cause of such a scene."

"Pouf!" she replied, laughing, and seeming to recover herself again on the instant. "It was bound to come sooner or later; as well now as at any time in the future."

"You see," said Nick, rather lamely, "he thought I kissed you, countess."

"And did you not? I thought so, too—for a moment. I dodged you only just in time, or—I tremble to think what might have happened. But never mind that, now. Do you realize what you have done?"

"I am beginning to realize what I failed to do—and what I should have done."

"What?"

"I should have moved more quickly, and I should have been guilty in fact, as well as in appearance, although I do not think I would have survived had you been as angry at me as you were at him."

"Pouf! Let us talk sense for a moment. We need to. I ask you again: do you realize what you have done?"

"I am afraid that I do not, countess."

"You have made an enemy of Count Herbert."

"Oh! Well—that—it doesn't count for much, does it? He isn't really very dangerous, is he?"

"You have done more than that, monsieur, for you have also made him the enemy of the princess, and——"

"Why should anything that has occurred in this room affect the princess?"

"Because—don't you see?—he hates me, now. I have kept him loyal to her by letting him believe that I might some day learn to endure him; don't you see?"

"I begin to; yes."

"And now the fat is all in the fire. He will go straight to the king."

"To the king? With what?"

"With all he knows about this affair from the beginning."

"This affair? Do you mean the matter that has just happened, or are you referring to the 'affair' of the princess?"

"I suppose really that I am referring to both."

"Countess, I begin to understand that it is high time that you and I had a really confidential talk together. I surmised as much before, but now it is quite apparent. I must touch upon your own matter first, before I approach that of the princess, for you must tell me what is likely to happen. You say that Count Linmark will go straight to the king about this scene here; what do you suppose he will tell the king?"

"I don't know. He is a deep man and a dangerous one when he is aroused."

"Will he seek to traduce you to the king?"

"He certainly will; and it will not be a difficult matter, for the king does not like me any too well as it is. And it would be terrible if I were ordered away from the palace, Mr. Carter."

"Why so?"

"Oh, I cannot tell you; I must not tell you yet; neither must I remain here another moment in your company. If the king were to return——"

"Then where may I see you, and have a private conversation with you? Where shall I find you, some time this evening?"

"I don't know. Indeed, I do not. There is no place—not one within the palace walls that I can think of, unless——"

"Well, unless what?"

"Oh, I don't know. I am afraid you would not understand. I must go now."

"But I must see you, countess. How is it to be accomplished?"

"I don't know—now. I will find a way to communi-

cate with you. I will send my maid to you, with a note. Hark! Some one is coming."

"No; I don't think so. Wait a moment, please. Will you arrange for an interview this evening?"

"Yes; if it is possible."

"Cannot it be made possible?"

"Perhaps. Yes—if you will promise not to misunderstand."

"Not misunderstand what, countess?"

"Not to misunderstand me, when I send for you to meet me. You will know, will you not, that everything I do will be for Deehra's sake? And that whatever appearances there may be, I have faith in you, sir, as an American gentleman?"

"I will understand. I will know. You could have appealed to no stronger impulse than the one you did, if an appeal were necessary at all. I will hear from you, then, before evening?"

"Yes."

"How shall I hear?"

"I will send my maid to you. I don't know how, but she will find a way."

"How will I know her?"

"I will tell her to pronounce my name to you. Zita. Just that."

"Very well, countess."

"And you must promise to do exactly as you are told in the note, and also to trust implicitly to the discretion of Caroline."

"I give both promises."

"Hark! Isn't some one approaching? You have closed the door, and now——"

"There is another way out. Go through that door, yonder."

"It leads to a private sitting-room that is used by Prince Rupert."

"Never mind, take it. The prince is not in the palace at present. I happen to know that. Quick, countess. It is as well that you should not be found here with me again. But don't forget the appointment."

"No."

She hastened toward the door, then turned and ran toward the detective again, stretching out both hands as she did so.

"Remember," she whispered, as he seized them, "it is all for Deehra's sake, and because I trust you where I would not think of trusting one of these Carmanians. Remember!"

She turned, then, and fled through the door; and it had only just closed behind her when that other door was thrown open, disclosing the compact figure of the king, who paused there, frowning and angry; and just behind him, a few feet distant, the detective could see the outline of Count Herbert's figure.

"Since you failed to respond to my summons, Mr. Carter," said the king coldly, "I have decided to come to you. I trust that we find you disengaged, sir?"

"Quite so, your majesty. Quite so," replied Nick as coldly.

CHAPTER VII.

A PLOT WITHIN THE PALACE.

"I have here with me Count Herbert von Linmark, captain of the palace guards, who is also attached to my person," said the king, entering the room and motioning to the count, who followed him, to close the door. "Half an hour ago or more I sent the count to you here to request your presence in my cabinet, but he returned to me with a message that I deemed impertinent. I have chosen, however, to overlook it, and——"

"One moment, your majesty, if you please. I know that I am committing an impertinence now, when I interrupt you; but I cannot permit you to continue under a false impression. I sent no message to your majesty which could be construed as impertinent; if such a construction were placed upon the message I did send, it is the count who has been guilty of impertinence."

"The count shall state his case, then, and you may state yours."

"Again, if your majesty will pardon me, I must object. The person who now stands directly behind you, and to whom you refer as the count, can have no association with me, not even behind the shoulder and under the protection of a king. I have no business dealings with an insulter of women, sire. Please pardon me yet one moment more. I came here, sir, as a free agent, to serve you at the request of your brother. I can go away as I came, and very quickly, if your majesty has thought better of your decision to retain my services. But I am convinced that you need some one here to stand between your daughter, who is missing, and the plots of that man there who is behind you."

"We must dispose of your own case first, Mr. Carter, before we refer to the one in which the princess is concerned."

"I have no case to dispose of, your majesty—unless it is to give that cur who stands in your shadow at this moment the thrashing he deserves."

"Mr. Carter!"

"Your majesty?"

"I think we may dispense with your further services in this matter, as in all others."

The detective bowed, smiling.

"Whatever your bill of expenses may be up to the present moment, sir, will be attended to by my chamberlain. One moment, sir. You have chosen to interrupt me twice, but now I wish to speak. You took the liberty of affronting me in this room less than two hours ago. I learn now that at that very time a young woman who is attached to the body of my daughter was concealed behind that curtain, yonder, listening to all that passed between us. When I had taken my departure, she appeared again, and engaged in conversation with you, doubtless laughing with you over the affront you had put upon the king. Unfortunately for you, but quite fortunately for the good of my household, I left the door ajar when I went out of this room, and when, a little later, I sent Count von Linmark here to bid you to come to me, he discovered you, by the aid of that mirror yonder, with your arms around that young woman. Nevertheless, when he entered the room she had again disappeared behind the curtains, although she reappeared a moment later.

"You will perhaps admit that such conduct is unseemly, within my palace, and that I have a right to be surprised and displeased. You have called the count an insulter of women, but it seems to me that you are the one who should be called to account for what has happened.

"The count returned to me with the information that you would wait upon me presently, but you did not come. It was the count who returned to me to say that you were alone in this library with the young woman already referred to, and that you had no notion of coming to me until it pleased you to do so.

"But again I waited, until presently I could not conceal my impatience any longer, and then, bidding the count follow me, I came here to find—what? To find that your companion left you only when it became certain that some one was approaching; that she went out by the door yonder, through the private sitting room of Prince Rupert."

"Has your majesty quite finished?"

"Yes."

"Then, in justice to the lady, I wish to say that your majesty is laboring under a very great misapprehension of the facts. The lady was here when the person behind your majesty spied upon her by means of the mirror; but he has lied to you, sir, for my arms were not around her, and I had not touched her person more than with the tips of my fingers. That is all, I believe. I will, with your permission, remain in the palace until the return of Prince Rupert."

"Who calls my name?" came in hearty tones from the adjoining room, as the connecting door was quickly thrown open and Prince Rupert appeared on the threshold.

But he instantly perceived that something was amiss, and his hand went quickly to his brow to salute his king.

"Your majesty will pardon me?" he asked humbly. "I was not aware that you were present."

"You are not the only one, Rupert, who seems unaware of the presence of the king," replied the sovereign. "Mr. Carter will doubtless acquaint you with the subject matter of our conversation."

He turned on his heel and made a sign to Von Linmark to follow him. Then, as he was about to leave the room, the prince called after him.

"Pardon me, your majesty," he said, "but am I correct in inferring that there has been a misunderstanding of some sort?"

"No, Rupert; there has been no misunderstanding; there has been insolence. I have informed your friend here that his presence is no longer required in the palace, or desired in the country; that he may apply to the chamberlain for what is due him, and go," replied the king.

"His majesty," said Count Herbert, speaking for the first time, "has been affronted and flouted in his own palace by that upstart there, who——"

Again were the count's words checked in a summary manner, for now, with a quick motion, the detective stepped past the king and seized the man by the throat; then he crowded him backward against the door and held him there, while the prince looked on in horror that such

an act should be committed in the presence of the king, and the king himself was too astounded to move.

Suddenly jerking the count toward him, Nick with his other hand opened the door, and then, for the second time that day, propelled Count von Linmark swiftly through it. Then he closed the door and turned the key, smiling as he did so.

"I appreciate the fact that I am acting in rather a high-handed manner," he said, addressing the king, "but it seemed necessary to me under the circumstances. Your majesty is prejudiced against me by that snake whom I just threw out of the room. Do not for a moment think because of what I am saying that it is my desire to serve you. It is not. It is a great mistake that I came here at all, but I had been made to suppose that a king was necessarily also a gentleman. But I am here; I was brought here at your request, and by your brother, the prince. And now that I am here you shall hear what I have to say to you."

"This is intolerable!" exclaimed the king.

"Intolerable or not, you shall hear it. By your own stupid brutality, due, I suppose, to your nasty temper and to the pain in your head, you have driven your daughter, whom you pretend to love, to the point where she has thrown herself upon the mercy of those who would do her great harm. I am convinced of that. The man whom I have just thrown from the room is, I am certain, the principal mover in the plot against her; and now, at the very moment when I have reached a point where something may be discovered, you permit that cur to have access to you, and to poison your mind against those who would serve you.

"That is all, sir. I do not defend myself, for there is nothing that needs defense in my conduct; but I have a reputation which is quite as sacred to me as yours, king though you are, is to you; and I tell you now to your face, that if that young woman who was here in this room with me is made to suffer at all because of the lies of Von Linmark, I shall see to it that the true story of this affair is published broadcast throughout the world. I am not afraid of you nor all your legions, even though I stand now apparently defenseless within the four walls of your palace. As a king and a father, I am sorry for you and pity you, but as a man I feel for you only contempt."

Before the king could make reply, there came a determined knocking upon the door that the detective had closed and locked, and, remembering that he held the key to it, Nick stepped forward and threw it open.

Beyond the threshold stood four of the palace guards, and behind them Von Linmark, who, the instant the door was opened, pointed his finger at Nick and called out:

"That is the man! Place him under arrest."

The detective stepped back into the room and turned a smiling face upon the monarch, as if he would have asked if the king intended to go so far, although in reality he said no word.

But the count had exceeded his prerogatives, and the king, ever impetuous and petulant, pointed his own finger sternly toward Von Linmark and shouted in a passion:

"How dare you act as you have done without my orders? It is you who are under arrest. Retire to your quarters, sir, and remain there until you are summoned."

He watched them haughtily until they had gone; then, without a word to his brother, or to the detective, he dropped his chin upon his breast, and passed silently through the doorway and was gone.

"What is it all about, Nicholas?" asked the prince, as soon as they were alone.

"I am of the opinion, Rupert," replied the detective slowly, but with emphasis, "that your august brother, the king, is mad." And it was with equal solemnity that Prince Rupert replied, also in a low tone:

"There are times when there can be no doubt of it, Nicholas. Is it true that he has dismissed you?"

"Yes."

"Will you be guided by me in the matter of that dismissal?"

"How do you mean, prince?"

"Will you consent to remain here in the palace as my guest until to-morrow, at least?"

The detective was on the point of refusing this invitation, when he recalled the fact that he had given a positive promise to Countess Zita to see her and hold an interview with her that evening. If he left the palace now, as for a few moments he had intended to do, it would be impossible for him to keep that engagement. He would not be there to receive the message sent to him through her maid.

As he thought upon the matter, the face of the Princess Deehra rose before him as he remembered it, beautiful and wistful, and he decided on the instant that if it were possible without belittling his own dignity he would remain.

"If you think it quite proper under the circumstances that I should do so," he replied at last.

"I think it not only proper, but I regard it as your duty. Will you remain, as my guest, at least until to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"Then, now that that is settled, I will ask you, if you please, to explain to me what you meant by a reference you made in the presence of the king to a plot in which Count Herbert is one of the prime movers. I confess I did not understand that."

"I will admit also that I did not," replied the detective with a smile. "It was said on the impulse of the moment, and without much to back the statement; but if you will leave all questions until to-morrow night, Rupert, I think by that time I will be able fully to explain."

"Very well, Nicholas. It shall be as you suggest."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MIDNIGHT APPOINTMENT.

If Nick Carter could have foreseen what it would mean to him, by remaining that night in the palace of the king, it is doubtful if he would have stayed; and yet, inasmuch as foreseeing an incident comprehends all that is associated with it, he might still have done so.

He had begun operations there with the idea that the Princess Dechra was voluntarily absent; that she had gone of her own accord; that she was quietly in hiding at some place not far distant; that one or more of her trusted ladies—such as Zita, for example—was perfectly well informed regarding where she was and how she was surrounded, and that, as soon as her father, the king, could be brought to reason, she would resume her place at court.

But since his arrival at the palace, and particularly after the remarkable conduct of the Count von Linmark, the detective was very much inclined to another view of the situation.

He believed now that he saw a plot within a plot.

He believed that in some manner which he had not yet been able to guess, Dechra had been made a catspaw to the machinations of Count Herbert and his followers, although for what ultimate purpose there was as yet no clue.

It was apparent to the detective that Zita had, in the beginning, been entirely in the confidence of her mistress, but that now she no longer knew where the princess was; it was also apparent to him that the count did know, although he pretended not to; and the only way in which Nick could hope to get an inkling of what was really going on was to hear all that the Countess Zita could tell him, and to direct his future actions from the knowledge so acquired.

He was grateful to the prince for having asked no questions about the countess, or rather about the "young woman" who had been the occasion of the scene with the king; he did not know that the prince attributed it all to the king's suspicious disposition, and thought that there was really nothing in it.

So the two dismissed unpleasant subjects for the time being and seated themselves for a quiet smoke together; but presently the detective becoming interested in a book, the prince left him, remarking as he went:

"I am going now for a private talk with the king. Will you remain here till I return?"

"Yes; if you wish."

"After that we will dine together in my own suite; and then——"

"Then, if you don't mind, I will excuse myself for the balance of the evening," the detective interrupted him. "I have a tentative engagement which I think it well to keep. It is because of that engagement, more than for any other reason, that I have consented to remain."

The prince raised his eyebrows, shrugged his shoulders, and, without another word on the subject, left the room.

"Now, what in the world did he mean by that?" the detective asked himself, after the prince had gone. "Is it possible that the whole royal family are becoming suspicious of my motives when I have been here only two days? It seems that the atmosphere of a palace is one of jealousy and mistrust. One thing is certain, and that is that I shall get out of it as soon as it is possible to do so."

He opened the book and speedily became interested in what he was reading; so much so that he did not hear a light step behind him, nor realize that a person had silently approached, until he heard a whispered remark in broken English, almost in his ear.

"Your excellency?" it said.

He dropped the book and turned quickly, to discover a young woman curtsying before him, and at the same time extending toward him a sealed envelope that she held in her hand.

"There is but one minute of time," she said. "My mistress sent a letter. Monsieur is to read and reply."

"Thank you," replied Nick; and he broke the seal.

The letter was without superscription of any kind, and began directly with the subject in hand. It read:

"It is a very great indiscretion that I am compelled to commit in order to keep my promise with you concerning the interview this evening. The consequences to me, if we are discovered, may be too terrible to contemplate, but as it is all for Deehra's sake, I will summon my courage to perform what I consider to be my duty.

"First, you must know that I have been ordered to keep my rooms, and not to leave them under any consideration whatever; all that is the consequence of what happened this afternoon. Second, it is certain that your own every move will be closely watched, and that no matter what you do or where you go, your actions will be reported to the king, through the agency of Count Herbert. Bearing those two things in mind, you must govern yourself accordingly.

"But it is necessary that I should tell you all that I know concerning the disappearance of the princess, for at least I am convinced that she is in danger of some sort, and I am also certain that she is no longer in hiding where I supposed her to be. She has been taken away from that place, and, since I am certain that she would not have gone willingly without letting me know about it, I am convinced that she has been taken away by force.

"There is, as you guessed, another love affair, but you must not suppose that the princess has forgotten her station in life, her womanhood, or her purity of soul in this matter. She has not seen the man she loves since she voluntarily left the care of her father; but I must not even try to explain these things here, in writing, for the double reason that one never knows what may happen to written words, and because I can explain so much more fully and simply by word of mouth.

"Annette, who takes this letter to you, is thoroughly trustworthy. She will bring me your answer, which you may send verbally, by merely a "yes" or a "no"; but before you send your answer, I wish you thoroughly to consider all the conditions of the situation.

"This sounds rather portentous, I know, but you will understand as I proceed.

"We must have the interview to-night, and after it do that which will aid my mistress in her trouble; it is necessary that we leave the palace together, under cover of the night, and the only way in which that can be done is through a secret passage which communicates with my apartments, and which, strangely enough, is unknown to the king, and, I believe also, to any of the present members of the household. You will understand from this something of the risk I must run.

"I do not refer to any risk to you, although that is also great. Your life, even your liberty for a time, may be in danger, but my reputation depends entirely upon your discretion. You must understand from this how much I love the princess, and how intense is my desire to aid her. Pray, also, do not remember against me the frivolity of this afternoon. That was only my natural enjoyment of mischief; but I believe you understood it so.

"Now, sir, if you believe that I am right in risking so much for the sake of my mistress; if you think I am justified in inviting you to go with me at dead of night in order to serve her; if you regard it as my duty to stake so greatly upon the hope of aiding her in her trouble, be prepared, at the stroke of twelve to-night, to follow Annette where she will lead you, for she will bring you to me.

"In order to do that, she will look for you at that hour behind the same curtains where I concealed myself to-day. If the coast is clear, she will speak to you; if she does not speak, you are to remain concealed until she returns and does so. If she speaks, you are to step out from behind the curtains and follow her in silence, keeping sufficiently far behind her so that if you are encountered it will not be supposed that you are together or that you are following her.

"That is all the direction I need give you now, save that you must use every precaution to avoid discovery, remembering that you are watched, and that the approaches to my apartments may be under surveillance even at that hour of the night.

"You will recall the fact that I said to you to-day that you must not misunderstand me. I trust that you realize now what I meant by that remark."

The letter ended as abruptly as it began, and Nick raised his eyes and looked into the brilliant black ones of the maid who stood at his elbow.

"Well, sir?" she asked him.

"Annette, do you know the contents of this letter?" he asked her.

"Yes, sir," she replied.

"Do you think that what your mistress suggests here can be done safely? For her, I mean?"

"I think so, sir."

"Very well. I will be behind the curtains at midnight. You know where?"

"I do."

"Would it not be well if I were to wear some sort of a disguise?"

"It is not necessary. If you are seen at all, it will not matter what you have on, and if you should have to defend yourself, it might be easier to do so as you are than in another costume."

"You are right about that."

"I will come for you at twelve, sir. If I do not speak, you are to remain concealed; if I speak to you, you are to follow me in silence. Is it understood?"

"Yes."

The first act of the detective as soon as he was alone was to cross over to the fireplace and touch a lighted match to the letter he had received; and then he stood watching it burn to a cinder in the grate.

And then he suddenly became conscious of the fact that he was not alone in the room, and wheeling quickly he found that one of the palace guards was in the act of leaving the doorway.

"Now I wonder," mused the detective, as he resumed his seat, "if that is one of the fellows who are detailed to watch me? I wonder if he knows of the interview between Annette and me? Also, if he saw the letter passed from her to me, and knows that it is the letter that I burned? Well, anyhow, there is one consolation, and that is that he could not have overheard the conversation that passed between us, for that was couched in much too low a tone."

He resumed the reading of the book that had interested him, and remained thus until the return of the prince, who came in a few moments later.

"Nicholas," he said, as soon as he was in the room, "I really do not see any way out of all this melee, save that of your return to America. It seems too bad, after my long journey to secure your services, but the king is determined that you shall go, and that you shall have nothing more to do with the disappearance of the princess."

"He does not want her found, then?"

"He is of the opinion, now, that she will return voluntarily."

"I think so, too—if she could," said the detective dryly.

"What? Have you changed your opinion? Do you believe that she is really detained against her will?"

"I am positive of it—now."

"You were not so positive when I left this room a little while ago."

"No."

"Then you have received other information since then?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell me what it is?"

"If you will ask me that question to-morrow morning, prince, I will tell you," was the smiling reply.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MIDNIGHT MEETING.

We need not explain all the difficulties the detective had to overcome in order to be at the place of rendezvous he had made with Annette at the appointed time; but, nevertheless, at five minutes before twelve he entered the small library, having approached it by devious and winding ways from his own room, and concealed himself behind the curtains, as he had been requested to do.

He believed that he had been unobserved; he was quite sure that nobody was watching him when he entered the library.

It did not occur to him that the man who had witnessed, if not heard, the interview between him and Annette, during the afternoon, had reported the occurrence so exactly that it was not thought necessary to watch him, but only to keep a close surveillance over the approaches to the Countess Zita's apartments.

Nick did not realize that it was Count Herbert who was doing all the watching and spying, and that the king really knew nothing about it, and would not have countenanced it if he had known.

All these things were to be developed later on, as he was destined to discover.

The soft chimes of the buhl clock on the mantel were announcing midnight when the door was softly thrust open and Annette glided into the room.

She gave one quick and comprehensive glance around her, then moved quickly over to the curtains and thrust a handle behind them; then she spoke rapidly:

"I am sure that I have been watched," she said. "I do not think it is safe for us to go through the corridors together. Do you know how to find the countess' apartments?"

"No; I haven't the least idea where they are located," replied the detective.

"You have been to the suite of the princess? You were taken there when you first came."

"Yes."

"Directly across the corridor from her door, did you

not notice another one that is concealed behind curtains of blue?"

"Yes."

"That is the entrance to the apartments of the Countess Zita. Can you find it, now?"

"Yes."

"You are sure?"

"Yes."

"You must go there alone. In the bundle I have just thrust behind the curtains is a long cloak with a hood, which will conceal you if you have to make use of it. Wait here where you are until five minutes after I have gone away, then make your way to the countess' door and tap upon it. As you tap against it, turn the knob and enter, closing it behind you at once. That is all."

"But what of you, Annette?"

"I will find a way to return. If there is no danger, I will be there to enter with you, but if there is danger I shall try to lead those who are watching astray. I must go."

Without another word she glided away, leaving the detective to his own devices.

Nick waited until he supposed that the allotted five minutes had elapsed, and then he stole from his place of concealment, pulling the cloak softly around him as he did so, and drawing the hood closely over his head, the better to conceal him from observation.

He glanced up and down the corridor before stepping into it, but as there was not a person in sight, he passed quickly out and hastened with what speed he dared use toward the goal he had in mind.

To reach it he had to traverse a long corridor on that floor of the palace, and then ascend a winding flight of stairs to the floor above. That done, he passed through two other corridors until he arrived at the east wing of the palace, where, after turning one sharp corner, it would be only a few paces farther to the door of the countess' room.

He got that far in safety; that is, to the turning of the corridor; and he was convinced that the worst was over, and that he would soon be safe, when, upon turning the sharp corner, he almost collided with Count Herbert von Linmark, who was leathily walking in the opposite direction.

The encounter was so sudden and so unexpected by either party that the count, in starting backward, tripped and fell to the floor; and as he fell Nick seized him, lifted him in his arms, and then ran with him to the end of the short corridor where there was an open window looking out upon the grounds of the palace.

Before the astonished count realized what had happened to him, or what was about to be done with him, Nick had thrust him through the open window to the narrow balcony outside, had lifted him over the railing, and dropped him the twelve or fourteen feet to the soft turf below.

With a low chuckle—for Nick rather enjoyed that little by-play—he stepped back quickly into the corridor, closing the window behind him, and then, with a few quick strides, he passed to the door of Zita's rooms, tapped as he had been told to do, opened the door, and entered.

Instantly, as he closed the door, he felt a trembling hand upon his arm, and a gasping voice whisper in his ear:

"Who is it? Who is it?"

"It is I," he replied. "Don't be alarmed, countess."

"But Annette! Where is she?"

"She thought it best that I should come here alone. She will follow presently;" and then, in as few words as possible, he explained all that Annette had said to him.

"Did she say that I was to wait here to admit her, or that I should leave the door unlocked?" asked Zita.

"No; and if you will take my advice, you will do neither. Annette said that she would find a way to get inside, and I suspect that she knows what she is about."

"Come, then," said Zita; and she led the way to the parlor of her suite.

There she paused directly under the light of the chandelier, and turned to face him.

The detective had not realized until that moment how really beautiful Zita was; but now that her face was suffused with blushes because of the strangeness of the situation, and that her eyes were troubled and anxious, and yet that she was determined to go ahead with what she had undertaken, she was rendered thrice attractive.

"You were not seen, as you came here?" she asked quickly.

"I certainly was not recognized, countess."

"Ah! Then you were seen?"

"I was felt, if not seen," replied Nick, laughing; and then he told her of the encounter with Von Linmark.

"But he will return. He will know that you were on your way here—at least, he will suppose so, and——"

"Listen to me one moment, countess. Even if the count suspects who it was that collided with him, and even if he suspects that I was coming here, he will not dare to investigate, for I am satisfied that he is doing this watching entirely on his own responsibility. I don't believe that the king would countenance it at all, and, therefore, the count will dare do nothing more than to wait and watch."

"But even so——"

"Well?"

"Oh, dear! I am unnerved by all this, Mr. Carter. I feel as if something terrible were about to happen. I do not know what it is, but if there is any truth in intuition, then one of us will have to suffer for what we are doing now; and it is not likely to be you."

"Well, countess, since I am here, and because the purpose of my visit here is to learn something about the possible fate of the princess, don't you think you had better tell me all that you know about it?"

"Yes. That is why I have asked you here; because I believed it was my duty to do so."

"I am glad that you did so."

"You must know that I concealed myself in that window to-day purposely to hear and watch you. I wished to decide in my own mind if I could trust you."

"And you decided that you could?"

"Your presence here is your best answer to that question, sir."

"I know it is."

"It was when I heard you upbraid the king for his treatment of the princess that I made up my mind to tell you all I know about the disappearance of the princess, and only for the untimely interference of the count—of Von Linmark—this clandestine meeting would not have been necessary. And I alone am at fault for that."

"How so?"

"Because I forgot."

"Forgot what?"

"Forgot that I had made an appointment in that very room with the count; forgot that it was time for him to be there, when I was amusing myself coquetting with you. He was due at that room then, to keep his appointment with me, and I should have remembered it. Moreover, I should have told you that he was coming and have asked you to step behind the curtains and listen. Don't you see how I failed at every point?"

"Well, well, it does you no good to talk about failures. The thing is, do you know where the princess is now?"

"No; I do not. I thought I did, until yesterday; but then I discovered that I had been deceived. At first I believed that it was Deehra herself who had deceived me, and I was angry; but later I thought better of that idea, for I know that she would not do such a thing. But it was evidently so arranged that I should be led to believe that she had wilfully deceived me, in order to turn me against her."

"Do you realize, countess, that you are talking in enigmas? Don't you think you had better commence at the beginning, and tell me the entire story, just as you know it?"

"Yes; if there is time."

"We must take time, for I must know all about it, if you wish me to help you—and her."

"But we have yet quite a journey to make, and we must return here before daylight."

"We have a long time before that, countess. Remember, it is midwinter now, and dawn does not appear in this latitude until about eight o'clock in the morning. Much can be accomplished between now and then."

"You won't forget that you must return to your own rooms in time to avoid all chance of discovery?"

"I will try to forget nothing, countess."

"And shall I tell you the princess' story, now, before we go in search of her?"

"By all means."

"The story that I promised her I would never tell to a living soul, no matter what might happen?"

"Yes. If you wish me to help you and her, you must hold nothing back."

"Very well, I will—— *Hark!* What was that? Did not some one tap against the outer door?"

"Yes. I think so; but take my advice and pay no attention to it. Remember, it is after midnight now, and you are supposed to be in bed."

"But suppose it should be Annette?"

"Then let Annette take care of herself. The risk is too great for you to venture to the door now."

CHAPTER X.

THE PLOT OF A PRINCESS.

"It was a little more than two years ago, Mr. Carter," the countess said, beginning her story in a low tone, and with partly averted face, "that a young officer of your United States army was sent here as military attaché to the embassy—a young officer whose official title was major, and whose name was Richard Hartwell. I wonder if you happen to know him personally?"

"No; but I know about him. I know Dick Hartwell's father very well, indeed, and also two of his brothers. I also know that within the last year he has greatly offended his family by resigning from the army. Is he the man?"

"Yes."

"Who is in love with the princess?"

"Yes; and with whom she is fearfully and dreadfully in love."

"Really. I have always heard that Dick Hartwell is a handsome fellow, but I did not suppose he would aim as high as a princess."

"He is handsome. He is the handsomest man I ever saw, and I think one of the best. I am almost in love with him myself."

"So it would seem. Well, what about him?"

"It was a case of love at sight between Major Hartwell and Deehra. After she had met him and had passed a few moments only in his society, she could talk of nothing else but him, and—well, I never knew of such a case in all my life."

"Stick to your story, please."

"That first meeting was the beginning—on her part, mind you—of a succession of meetings which she managed to contrive, or had me contrive for her. All the time she did not conceal her interest in him from me, but frankly confessed that she adored the man. I tried to argue her out of it all, reminding her who she was, of her duty to her station in life, of what was expected of her by all the courts of Europe, and that she was destined to become the wife of a crown prince, at least.

"But she would have none of it. She railed at her fate. She used to say that she wished she had been born a pauper, rather than a princess, and she took a solemn oath on the cross that she would never wed with any one but him."

"And all this time was he unconscious of the passion he had aroused in the princess?"

"I foolishly supposed he was so, until one day when Deehra and I were walking in the park together, and were in the act of passing the small, private door in the wall, he opened it and stepped through and confronted us. I realized then that there was already an understanding between them."

"The major committed a very grave offense by penetrating to the private grounds of the palace at a time when he was attached to the embassy here."

"I know that. He was aware of it, also; so was the princess; but it made no difference. I need not give you the details of that meeting. It was the first of very many that happened after it. They knew that they were playing with fire that would some day destroy them, but they only laughed at my fears when I reminded them of what would be the result of it all."

"And then——"

"Then came the second important offer for the hand of the princess, which she refused. It was a crisis. The princess, through an old nurse, now dead, knew about a secret passage from this suite of rooms to the outside of the palace; and one night she forced me to meet the major outside the palace grounds and to conduct him here, to these rooms, in order that she might have an interview with him."

"You did it, countess?"

"I did it, yes; very much against my will; but I did it. Only Annette, the princess herself, the major, and I knew about that meeting, or about many others that occurred subsequently. I lived in terror during those days. Those two used to remain in this room alone for an hour at a time, talking over impossible plans that they made for themselves, while Annette and I waited in the adjoining room, with the door open, of course, but out of sight and hearing, also.

"Finally the strain upon me became so great that I flatly refused to have anything more to do with it, and was on the point of leaving the palace for my home, when the princess told me that there would be no more meetings; the major was going away, and that I need have no more fear.

"But she seemed strangely happy with the announcement, and I was sure that there was something back of it all, and I asked her about it.

"She refused to tell me at the moment, but promised to do so when the proper time came.

"Then one day she took me into her confidence and related their plans, first making me take a most solemn oath of secrecy. I am getting along just as fast as I can, Mr. Carter, and I would not bother you with all this if I did not think it were necessary."

"You are quite right. I wish to hear it all."

"Their plan, in a nutshell, was this: Deehra was to watch and wait until her father, the king, seemed to be in the right mood, and then she was to tell him of her love, and beg him to let her marry the man of her choice; she was to tell him that the major was willing to become his subject, to forswear his own land and people, and to take any position under this government that the king would assign to him."

"Did they suppose for a moment that the king would consent to such a thing as that?"

"Their love made them think so; but ultimately they abandoned the idea. Deehra did no more than sound the king, one day, but she speedily discovered that she could never hope to win him to her project, notwithstanding his love for her."

"Well, what next?"

"They had already arranged the rest of their plan in case this one should fail, and it is to that I must now refer, as it has the most to do with the present difficulty."

"Exactly. Go ahead."

"It was arranged, in a word, that Deehra should run away; that she should disappear."

"I suspected as much. What were they to do—fly to another country and be married?"

"No; Deehra would not consent to that. She made her conditions, and she would not go behind them."

"What were they?"

"There were several. I will recite them in their proper order."

"If you please."

"First, Richard Hartwell must resign his position here, leave Breslin, and also resign from the army, so that he became only a private citizen of his own country, and was prepared at any moment, if necessary, to forego that, also."

"I understand. Well?"

"Second, he was to remain away from her during one entire year, and was not, during that time, to make any effort to see her, or to communicate with her."

"Why was that?"

"Because she wished her own people here to be led to believe that she cared nothing for the young American to whom she had shown some preference."

"I see. She was to appear to forget him."

"Yes."

"Well?"

"After the year of absence was past, Deehra was to await a good opportunity—and also an excuse, if she could find one—and then she was to disappear. She was to accomplish it by means of this secret passage that we will use later, when I have quite finished with my story."

"Yes."

"If she made her escape successfully, she was to go into hiding with a woman who had already been subsidized for the purpose—a foreigner, of course. She was not to leave the city of Breslin during another year, but was to remain securely hidden away until all the frantic search after her, which she supposed would follow her disappearance, was over."

"That, if I follow you correctly, necessitated two years of separation between the lovers, countess?"

"Yes."

"And during that time were they never to meet or communicate?"

"Not at all. I heard the princess tell Mr. Hartwell that if he disobeyed her in a single particular, she should return at once to the palace, and would never voluntarily see him again. She can be very determined if she chooses, and she meant what she said."

"Well?"

"When the second year was past, Deehra was to go quietly to London, accompanied by the woman in whose charge she had been, and was to reside there another three months with her, going about openly in the streets, although under an assumed name, to be sure, and striving by every passive means possible to attract attention to herself in order to discover if she would be recognized; and then, if at the end of three months she remained unrecognized and uncommented upon, as the possible missing princess, her lover was to go after her, they were to be quietly married, and—live happily ever afterward. A very pretty romance, was it not—in perspective?"

"Very; very pretty, indeed."

"Well, Mr. Carter, the first year of their plans has elapsed. Mr. Hartwell—no longer Major Hartwell—has been absent from Breslin nearly three months more than a year. A few months ago the public affront which the king put upon the princess supplied her with the excuse to run away from the palace. That night, when she retired to her rooms and ordered that she be left alone, she made her arrangements and then passed out of doors from her own windows and came straight around to mine, by means of certain rope ladders that we had already devised.

"As soon as she entered my rooms, the ladders were disposed of by being burned in my fireplace, and then, with the aid of Count Herbert of Linmark——"

"Ah! He was in the scheme, was he?"

"Only to the extent of assisting us that night. I had managed that. He escorted her, with me, mind you, to a house where the woman who was to care for her had agreed to meet her. We bade the princess good-by there, leaving her with the woman I have referred to. We returned to the palace.

"The count did not know that the house where we left her was not the one where she was intending to remain. He must have discovered that later on. I was not to attempt to see the princess again until she sent for me, or until we were both assured that the meeting could take place without danger of discovery."

"And you have not seen her since that night?"

"No."

"Nor made the effort?"

"Yes; I made the effort the night before last. I went to the house where it was agreed that she was to remain for a year, but the place was dark and deserted. The princess is not there."

"And your idea of the meaning of her absence? What is it, countess?"

"Either that she had repented of the time that must elapse before she could see her lover—or that Count Herbert has made her the victim of a counterplot."

"And what is your idea of what we ought to do tonight, countess?"

"I wish to take you to the house where Deehra was to remain. I wish you to judge for yourself what has happened."

CHAPTER XI.

THE SECRET PASSAGE.

The secret passageway from the palace to the street was a deviously winding one, and was as old as the building itself; so old, in fact, that none of the present

generation had ever been told about it. Doubtless the old nurse who had explained its existence to the princess was the last of the preceding generation who knew about it.

Nick Carter and the countess were half-way through the passage to the street, when the detective stopped suddenly and said:

"Countess, Herbert von Linmark must know about this passageway, then—eh?"

"No; he knows nothing about it."

"How, then, did he assist you on the night of the escape of the princess?"

"He waited outside the palace. He did not know how we got out. He believed that we had bribed the guards, and I know that since then he has sought diligently to discover who it was we bribed."

"How was it that he never told the king about the secret of Dechra's flight?"

"In the beginning he was afraid to do so; later, I now believe, he had other objects in view."

"Such as——"

"Such as forcing the princess, disgraced as he believes she will be, to marry him."

"But the man is in love with you, countess."

"Oh, I know that; but his ambition is greater than his love; and, besides, he knows that I heartily despise him."

"Do you suppose he really believes that he can force the princess to become his wife?"

"Yes."

"He is such a scoundrel as that, is he? I knew he was a villain, but it does not seem possible that a man could descend voluntarily to such depths as that."

"He doesn't have to descend, Mr. Carter; he is already there. He is the worst scoundrel in all the world, I verily believe."

They stepped out a moment later into the street. Zita had thrown a thick cloak over her ordinary wraps, the better to disguise her figure, and she wore a thick hood that belonged to her maid drawn tightly over her head. More than that, she had been thoughtful enough to provide a coachman's great coat, fur cap, and gloves for the detective, who had, of course, gone to her room without outdoor wraps of any kind.

The street was apparently deserted as they entered upon it; the time was then a little before one in the morning.

"How far do we have to go, countess?" asked Nick.

"It is, I should say, about half a mile from here; but we can go quickly," she replied.

"If we meet a police officer, what am I to say to him? Have you a story already provided?"

"Yes. If we meet one who accosts us, leave it to me. Let me do the talking. But I do not think we will be troubled."

Nor were they. They went on rapidly, making several sharp turns, until at last Zita came to a pause before a house that was set back some distance from the street, and was protected at the front by a tall, wrought-iron fence and gate.

Zita produced a key to the lock of the gate, and they entered, she closing and relocking the gate as they passed inside.

But even from the street Nick had seen that the house bore every appearance of being deserted, or at least abandoned, and he was not therefore surprised when their rappings and rings brought forth no response.

"You see," said Zita. "She is not here. It is my belief that she has not been here since the very first. I think that the count engaged somebody to follow them here, that night she left the palace, and that he has managed to spirit her away from this retreat almost at once. Don't you think so?"

"Yes. I think there is no doubt of it. But we will have a look inside the house, at least, countess."

"How will you do that?"

The detective had already produced his small picklock and was now busily engaged using it; and even while Zita asked the question the door came open in his grasp, and he pulled his pocket-flashlight, and illumined the way before them.

Inside the house everything was cold and dismal; there had been no fires within those walls in many weeks, and the cold had penetrated everything. The thermometer registered many degrees below freezing even then.

They passed along the main hallway of the mansion toward the living-rooms, and presently the detective opened a door which gave upon a library, where it was at once evident that the former occupants of the house had been accustomed to passing considerable of their time.

Two comfortable chairs were drawn before the now cheerless fireplace; a work-table stood between them, and upon it rested an embroidery-hoop with a needle sticking in the work.

When Zita saw this, she gasped and turned pale.

"See!" she exclaimed. "It is the very bit of work that Dechra took with her the night she went away. She laughingly said that it would help her to kill time. Look, Mr. Carter! Do you see that there is a spot of blood upon it?"

"Yes; doubtless the princess pricked her finger while at work. It is no more than that."

There was nothing more on that floor that was of interest, and presently the detective led the way up the stairs to the one above, and, by instinct or accident, went directly to the room he wished most to see—the one that the princess had used as a sleeping-apartment.

Here there was considerable disorder, as if the occupant had made ready in great haste to depart.

But there was no clue anywhere as to where they had

gone or when they had departed, save only the apparent fact that they had been absent a considerable time.

Nick searched the house from the top to the bottom; there was not a servant to be found, and it looked as if every person who had been there had been packed off at the same time.

In the kitchen food had been left behind that was half-way in the course of preparation, and there were other numerous evidences of a hasty departure.

"There can be only one of two explanations for all this," said the detective. "Either the princess was told that her father, the king, had discovered her place of hiding, and she went away from here willingly and freely, in order to escape him, or she has been carried away by sheer force, attacked at a time when she was unprepared for it. I am inclined to believe, however, that she was frightened away."

"But where shall we search for her, Mr. Carter?"

"I begin to think," replied the detective slowly, "that we will have to wring the secret out of Count Herbert, for I believe he is the only man who knows. Come. We must return to the palace, countess. You have risked too much already in this affair. Only, before we go back, I must inform you that I leave the palace in the morning. The king has informed me that my presence is no longer desirable."

"And you will go?" she cried out, in alarm.

"From the palace? Yes. From the city and the country? Presumably; but not really. I will not desert you, countess, now that I know what the trouble is all about. The princess needs a friend, and I will be that friend if I can; and yours, too."

"Oh, how can I thank you?"

"You can thank me, countess, by hurrying now as fast as possible."

"But how will you be able to make Von Linmark tell his secret, if you are to be no longer at the palace where you can get at him?" she demanded.

"I will do it by getting at him at once, this very night. That is why I wish to hurry."

"Oh! Come, then! Come!"

She almost led the pace back to the entrance to the secret passage, which underground passage came up in the very center of the wall at a point where one of the abutments protruded from it. He stood close to her while she opened the secret door, and then followed her into it, and they did not speak again until they were once more within the parlor of her own suite of rooms.

And there, waiting for them, and wringing her hands together in terror as soon as they appeared, was Annette; and she exclaimed at once, as soon as they entered the room:

"Oh, my mistress! It is terrible! Outside in the corridor are armed men in waiting! Under the windows in the garden are others, and all have been placed where they are by that fiend of a man, Count Herbert. It seems that Mr. Carter dropped him out of the window to the ground, and that he turned his ankle in falling. He swears that Mr. Carter entered the rooms of the Countess Zita—your rooms, my mistress—and that he is there yet. Here, you know. The king has not been told, but every one else in the palace knows what is going on, and all are expecting a terrible scandal. It is awful. What shall be done? What shall be done?"

"How did you get inside, Annette?" asked the detective.

"I ran and entered before they placed a guard at the door. You had only just gone through the passage. I listened and could hear you. Then I barred the doors, or I am sure that Count Herbert would have dared to force his way in here. I think the man is mad; quite mad!"

"What shall we do?" asked the countess, thoroughly alarmed now, for she could see no way out of the difficulty.

"It is very simple," said Nick, smiling; "that is, if you will listen to me."

"Of course, I will listen. But——"

"To whom do these articles of wearing apparel that I have got on belong, countess?"

"They belong to me. I purchased them for my own use, in case I wished to go abroad for the princess."

"Then, if you will go with me again as far as the street, I will find a way to get into the palace without attracting attention. Don't think of me at all, or of what will happen to me. Give it no thought. Think only of yourself, and remember that your only course now is to retire as if nothing had happened and pretend not to know that there is a guard at your door and under your window."

"But you—how will you reenter the palace from the outside?"

"I have told you not to consider me. I know a way to enter the palace. I will have to take Prince Rupert into my confidence, but I think I may do that."

"Prince Rupert? No; not even he, Mr. Carter. He does not trust me."

"But he will have to trust *me;* don't you see? You do not enter into this. The best answer to anything that could be said about you, for last night, is the fact that guards were placed outside your door at midnight, and have remained there ever since. As for me, who am charged by the count with having misbehaved—I will presently walk through the corridors of the palace arm in arm with the prince; and there will be no questions asked after that."

"And the princess? What of her?"

"My dear countess, if you will ask me that question an hour before dark to-night, I will undertake to answer it; but not before then."

CHAPTER XII.

NICK CARTER RESCUES A PRINCESS.

The mere fact that the detective, by force of circumstances, was compelled to return by way of the secret passageway to the streets of the city was the most fortunate thing that could have happened, as events proved themselves, although he had no idea of it at the time.

Zita went with him through the long passage to the secret door in the wall, which opened upon the street, and, as they were about to part, she looked wistfully into his eyes, and, bending a little nearer to him, whispered:

"Be careful, won't you, for my sake?"

"Yes," he replied, smiling. "I will be all right."

He raised her hand to his lips and touched them to it; then, with a faint "Good night, Zita!" he turned away and was gone, refusing to see that she would have lingered longer with him had he permitted it; refusing to observe that this impulsive young woman already believed him to be the perfection of mankind.

He heard a deep sigh as he left her; and then followed the click of the latch in the secret door, and he stood alone upon the frozen street.

There was yet more than an hour before it would be dawn, and ere it would be advisable for him to apply at the private door of the entrance to the prince's wing of the palace, as he intended ultimately to do; and, with sudden decision, he turned his steps again toward the house he had lately visited in the company of the countess.

Why he did so he could not have told, save that he wished to do something to kill time. He did not believe that there was more to be discovered at that house.

But turn his steps in that direction he did, and he walked rapidly, until he stood again where he had halted for a moment with Zita before entering the house.

He gazed up at the windows for a moment, and then, following some hidden impulse for which there seemed to exist no reason at all, he wheeled suddenly in his tracks and gazed directly at the house opposite.

For a moment after he did so, he stood quite still, staring unbelievingly at what he saw; but he almost instantly realized that there could be no mistake; the motions he saw were intended for him.

At one of the windows in the mansard roof of the house on the opposite side of the street a white figure was standing, silhouetted plainly against the obscurity beyond it; and the figure was plainly making signs to him, too. To assure himself of this, he waved his hand in response, and at once perceived frantic signals in reply. He wondered why the woman—for he could see that it was a woman—did not open the window or break it, so that she could call to him, or why she did not strike a light, the better to be seen by him; but the obscurity was too great for him to determine an answer to these questions.

Then he saw her step backward until she was almost lost to view, and he believed he could see her then raise her hands, as if to show them to him; and he jumped at the conclusion that she was fastened somehow, so she could not get nearer to the window than she was when he saw her first.

Instantly his resolution was taken.

He pointed toward the house, then toward her window, and then he ran across the street and into the garden, ascending the steps at a bound.

His picklock served the purpose it had done once before that night, although not upon the same house and door; but he was not long in shooting back the bolt of the lock.

There was a chain-bolt inside the door, but his nippers quickly severed that, and he pushed the door open and entered the house. There he listened for a moment to discover if he had disturbed anybody, and, hearing no sound, he began to make his way up the stairs toward the top.

There were three flights of stairs to take him to the top of the house, and he ascended them all in absolute silence, remembering the location of the room from which he had been summoned; and presently he tapped lightly upon it.

There was no answer, and he tapped again; but there still being no reply, he concluded that there might be a reason for the continued silence, and began to examine for a way to get inside the room.

Flashing his light against the door, he discovered that there was a wooden bar across it, and this he at once removed. Still the door did not open; but again that wonderful little picklock came into play.

At last he succeeded in opening the door—to gaze into absolute darkness, save where the window through which he had seen the figure in white showed against the sky outside.

But he flashed his electric light upon the scene, and, to his utter astonishment, pointed the illuminating rays directly at the face of the Princess Deehra, who was sitting upright in the bed she had been occupying, and who was staring at him affrightedly.

But a voice from near the window called out in a whisper:

"Hush! No noise if you would help us! There is a woman here who will scream and give the alarm unless you quiet her. There! She is waking up! Quick! Stop her!"

And Nick did stop her, just in time. Then he stuffed a twisted pillow-case into her mouth to keep her from making further sound, and fastened her hands together with another one. In the meantime the princess had found her voice and also regained her poise.

"Who are you, sir?" she demanded, "and have you come here to save us, or to persecute us further? Who are you, and how did you get here?"

"One question at a time, princess, will be easier," replied Nick. "I have been spending nearly all the night looking for you, in company with Countess Zita; therefore I am your friend. We have been to the house opposite——"

"I saw you," interrupted the other woman, who had made the signals from the window. "I tried to attract your attention, but I could not; and, oh! how I prayed that you would return. Then I saw you again, and I *made* you look around, with my will."

"I believe you did, madam. I presume you are the woman who has had the care of the princess since she ran away, are you not?"

"Yes. I am Mrs. Hollbrook, an English woman. We had been in that other house less than a week when Count von Linmark came to us in great haste one evening and said that Zita had sent him. He told us that the king knew where we were hiding, and he offered us this house across the way, which he said belonged to a friend of his. We made ready in haste and came here, and as soon as we were here, he brought us to this room, which we have not been permitted to leave since; and he placed that woman you have gagged to watch over us. At night she sleeps here and is barred in with us. During the day she leaves us to ourselves. But see, sir, we are indeed captives. We are each chained by one wrist to our beds, so that we may not approach each other near enough to touch our hands together, and so that we may not approach the windows to make signals out of them. But each night, after that woman has fallen asleep, I have managed to drag my bedstead near enough to the window to make signals to every one who passed. Tonight I succeeded in getting it a little nearer than usual, and, thank Heaven, you saw me. That is the whole story, sir, but I beg of you to get us out of this and away before our jailer comes. If you can unlock these chains, we can soon put on our clothing."

Mrs. Hollbrook had talked so rapidly that there was not a chance to ask a question; and, indeed, none was needed.

Instantly Nick stepped across the room to the bedside of the princess.

"Princess Deehra," he said, "you will pardon me for finding you in this plight, I know; but I will soon relieve you. These are only ordinary handcuffs, with chains attached, and I have a key here that will unlock them."

"I know you!" she exclaimed. "You are Nicholas Carter. I have met you once before."

"Yes. That is correct. There! Now, madam—so! Please lose no time now in putting on your clothing. I will forage for some wraps, for the night is cold. When you want me, tap against the door."

Twenty minutes later Nick Carter led the two women safely into the street, having wrapped the princess in the coat he wore himself, and the elder woman in some wraps he had been fortunate enough to find in the house.

The distance to the secret entrance through the wall into the palace was soon traversed, but when the way was opened, the detective stopped.

"You know your way now, princess, do you not?" he asked.

"Yes; perfectly."

"Then let me advise that you go directly to the countess and that in the morning you send word to the king that you are there. I should advise further, if I may be permitted to do so, that you say nothing at present about the activity of Count Herbert in this affair. Wait a few days until you know exactly what the attitude of the king will be toward you."

"And you, sir? What will you do? Shall I not see you again, to thank you more becomingly for what you have done?"

"I shall leave Breslin during the day. It is not likely that we will meet again. Good night."

He turned abruptly away before she could say another word and was gone.

Later, when he was admitted to the bed-chamber of Prince Rupert, who gazed upon him wonderingly, he said:

"Rupert, I have been tramping the streets of Breslin a good part of the night, although there are those who will tell you that I have been elsewhere. I am, however, able to assure you that if you will go quietly to the apartments of the Countess Zita, you will find there your niece, the Princess Deehra, unharmed. Perhaps she will tell you that she has not been really absent from the palace at all; I do not know. But if she should, take my advice, and believe what she tells you. If you will have yourself dressed now, and order breakfast for us two, and then, while we are eating it, will summon Count Herbert here for a moment, I will be greatly obliged to you."

* * * * * * *

Half an hour later, when Count Herbert made his appearance, the prince said to him sternly:

"Count, this gentleman has told me certain things which renders your presence in Breslin a menace to the peace of the palace. If I find that you have taken your departure before night, well and good; if not, the king shall be made acquainted with the reason why you should be imprisoned for the rest of your life. Go!"

When he had slunk away, the prince turned to Nick and added, with a quaint smile:

"You have made me tell an untruth, Nicholas, for you have told me nothing. But I shall not ask you, realizing that there are some things that are better unknown."

THE END.

The next number (590) will contain "The Countess Zita's Defense; or, Nick Carter in the Palace of a King."

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TALKS WITH OUR READERS.

I dare say it would shock many a guest at our great hotels to be told that he is in a network of spies as complete and cunning as any devised by the Russian secret police; and that even the affable gentleman who passes him the salt or the waiter who brings him his soup may be a detective in disguise.

Not that the knowledge need take the edge off his appetite or cause him a moment's uneasiness, if he has a clear conscience and has no designs on the spoons. The spies will soon sum him up, and won't trouble him at all; but there are probably some among his fellow-guests on whom they have a very watchful eye.

The fact is, and it may as well be known, that almost every large hotel has its staff of spies, whose presence is indispensable in the interests of the hotel and its guests. The chief of the staff is a very wide-awake and experienced detective who has an intimate knowledge of the "crooks" who make big hotels their happy hunting-ground—card-sharpers, thieves, and swindling gentry of all kinds, who are about the cleverest scoundrels in the world.

These men, as I dare say you know, are almost invariably well-dressed, gentlemanly fellows, with all the appearance of men of wealth and with considerable skill in ingratiating themselves with their fellow-guests—and potential victims. They have to be very clever, however, to blind the hotel-detective, who, if he doesn't know them at sight, knows the type well enough and keeps a very keen eye on their movements.

Usually a tap on the shoulder and a word or two whispered in the ear are enough for these rascals. They may have just announced in the billiard-room that they intend to stay at least a month; somehow they are unexpectedly "called away," and within an hour the hotel knows them no more. These are, of course, the crooks who are immediately spotted by the detective, and who have short shrift; on those whom he suspects but is not sure of he keeps the eye of a lynx, and at the first suspicious sign out they go, too—quite quietly, with no fuss, but as forcefully as if they had been shot out.

And it is not only the professional crooks that the detective is on the watch for. He is responsible for the morals of every one in the hotel, from the guest who wanders innocently into a room not his own, and wishes to take away a souvenir of his absurd blunder, to the waiters, chambermaids, and cellarmen, who have mixed ideas as to the rights of property. They are all on his list, and they must be very cute to hoodwink him.

Oh, no, he doesn't work alone; he works through a score or more pairs of eyes as well as his own. He has a staff of assistants among the employes of the hotel, of every class from waiters to porters; and so secret is the system that these auxiliary detectives are unknown as such to their fellows and even to one another. You can imagine the difficulty of being dishonest under such conditions of secrecy and mystery; for there are eyes literally everywhere, and some of them are almost sure to be those of a spy, whose duty it is to report the most trifling deviation from honesty.

In some hotels the system is carried to such an extent that the most harmless-looking guests, and even their visitors, are shadowed in their goings and comings until their perfect respectability is placed beyond doubt; the corridors are patrolled by stealthy feet at night to ensure that there is no night-walking with felonious intent; and I have even heard that at one hotel there is a detective half-porter, with a skill in portrait-sketching, who keeps a record of the features of every new guest for future possible reference.

Naturally, mistakes are occasionally made through excess of zeal—it would be wonderful if they weren't—and quite innocent people are suspected of sinister designs. One detective I know nearly put his foot into it badly once. He felt sure that he recognized in a loudly-dressed guest a well-known "sport" from the West. On referring to his "rogues' album" the faces seemed identical, and the detective was just on the point of giving him a warning to clear out when, by a stroke of luck, he discovered that the suspected man was a worthy manufacturer, and mayor of his native town. What would have happened but for this providential discovery I shudder to think.

What does the head detective get? Well, a very comfortable salary, I can assure you. One man I know, who is about the smartest detective in America, gets $5,000 a year in addition to the best in the way of board and lodging; another has a salary of $4,000; and I have heard that the chief detective at a famous hotel gets as much as $6,000 a year—and no doubt he is cheap at the price.

Down in the southwestern corner of the Australian continent, near the pretty town of Fremantle, stands grim and solitary an enormous granite prison. Once it held no fewer than 28,000 prisoners, but now it is, we believe, quite empty. It is the last of the great Australian convict establishments, and although transportation was abolished by act of Parliament forty years ago, yet the life convicts of Fremantle remained on until they died or were set free. So lately as

1885 there were still some four hundred veterans in the place.

France, Spain, Portugal, Russia, and Turkey are to-day the only European countries which transport their criminals, and there are signs that this form of punishment will not be continued very much longer by civilized nations. Russia has already diminished the number of offences for which Siberia is the penalty.

France has two penal settlements, one the island of New Caledonia, which lies northeast of Australia, the other in French Guiana. Caledonia, or Ile Nou, has often been described as a sort of Inferno. As a matter of fact, it is the best managed convict island in the world. The climate is not bad, and the convicts can gain, by good conduct, pleasures and privileges unheard of in British prisons.

Convicts form the working classes of the islands. They stroll about unshackled and unguarded. They can smoke cigarettes and buy a little wine. The better class act as barbers, waiters, engineers and stokers, and can earn about fivepence a day.

The birch and the cat-o'-nine-tails are unknown in the island, the punishment being the "cachot," or black cell. A few hours or days in this living tomb is usually enough for any of them, however refractory. They come out like lambs. Bad as is the lash, it is nothing compared with a sentence of five years in the cachot, with only one hour of light in each thirty days!

Cayenne is very different. The climate is about as bad as bad can be. The work is principally masonry and clearing land. In case of mutiny hoses are ready charged with scalding water. The least infringement of the rigid discipline is visited with cruel punishments. One of the commonest is to reduce a man to one meal a day, and that nothing but bread and water. Death follows any attack on a warder whether injury is inflicted or not. The food, all except the bread, is wretched.

The most horrible of the penal colonies in existence at present are undoubtedly those of Spain at Ceuta and at Fernando Po. The latter place is an island in the Bight of Biafia. The average temperature all the year round is nearly eighty degrees, and the heat is a damp kind, most trying to Europeans. The horrors which Cuban patriots underwent in Fernando Po are not to be matched in Siberia itself. Three out of five died before they had been there two years.

Oddly enough, Portugal manages these matters much better than does Spain. She sends most of her convicts to Goa, on the coast of India, or to her East Africa possessions. Her system resembles that of New Caledonia, but is less strict. In fact, Portuguese convicts do very little hard labor. They are allowed almost complete liberty so long as they do not leave the limits of the settlement to which they are assigned. At Mozambique you may see Government officials playing billiards with convicts of good birth.

When a Turkish political prisoner is sentenced to be deported to Tripoli or to the Euphrates, his friends bid him farewell. They know that they will never see him again alive, and in all probability never hear of him again unless enormous sums are forthcoming to bribe scores of different officials. In fact, the only difference between a death sentence in Turkey and one of transportation is that the former is more rapid and more merciful. The Government prefers the latter because it is less public. Now and then, however, news leaks through; of poor Midhab Pacha, for instance, it is known that near Bagdad his brutal guard beat out his brains with the butt end of their rifles.

BURIED ALIVE IN THE OCEAN.

It was in my twenty-sixth year that my ship was chartered to go to San Francisco. We arrived there safely, loaded, and soon were outside of the Golden Gate heading for home. Everything went smoothly, and nothing occurred to forewarn me of the terrible adventure the future had in store for me.

We were to the southward of Valparaiso when I fell ill. It was a kind of faintness, that would suddenly and without warning come upon me, so that I often fell on the deck and lay there until some one could come to my assistance. This continued, without my getting much worse, until we got down off the Magellan Straits, in the latitude of Cape Pillar, or thereabouts.

One day, a gloomy, forbidding day, such as the mariner often meets with down there, I had the afternoon watch, and was superintending one of my men, who was fixing a ratline in the weather mizzentopmast rigging. The fellow was very clumsy, to say the least of it. I got annoyed watching his awkwardness; more annoyed, in fact, than was warranted, I think, now that I look back. But I was growing more and more irritable every day, which was probably owing to my fainting-spells.

Suddenly I became so excited that I jumped into the mizzen rigging and was into the top in a trice. I was about to pull the fellow away from his job when a fit came on. A sudden mist clouded my eyes; my senses left me; I reeled and fell from the top to the deck. In my descent I struck once or twice, which caused me to turn over, with the result that I fell on my head.

When I recovered consciousness I was lying in a bunk in the hospital. Still there was a thick mist before my eyes. I could, indeed, see everything so as to recognize where I was, but somehow my eyes refused to move about, and I could only stare straight up at the deck. I tried to raise my arm, but I could not; to sit up, but my muscles failed me.

At last the truth struggled into my darkened mind. I perceived at last that I was in a cataleptic trance. The strange part of it was that my mind was almost as active as ever. I knew all that was going on about me, and I felt an overwhelming terror at my possible fate.

It was soon made known to me. The captain entered my room. I could hear distinctly, as if it were afar off, his footstep on the deck. Then the steward also came in. I heard them consulting together, and both came to the conclusion that I was dead—that my neck was broken by the fall.

"Tell Sails to come in and take his measure. We must bury him to-morrow—while the fine weather lasts." I heard the captain say, and presently the sail-maker came in and measured me for the last hammock I should ever sleep in. I could not feel him, but I knew by his motions what he was doing.

I will not describe how they laid me out on the cabin table and left me there, while Sails, close by, made my shroud. Stitch, stitch, stitch went his needle, seeming to enter into my brain every time instead of the thick canvas. I can distinctly remember that while I lay there the steward tried to close my eyelids, but they flew up every time and left me the poor consolation of seeing the preparations for my doom.

At last all was finished. The canvas was spread on the deck, and I was laid in it. Then the sail-maker began to stitch me up. He had stitched up all but my face, when I heard him say he had lost his knife. A rigid search was made everywhere, but it could not be found, so Sails returned to work, and all that time I was thinking in my dull way what idiots they were for not looking into my shroud for the lost knife.

As I afterward learned, it was the next day at noon that I was carried on deck and laid on a plank, preparatory to being shot overboard. The men, one by one, took a look at my face, and then it was covered up forever. The burial service was read by the captain, there was a little delay, and then the plank was tilted, and I shot into the bitter cold water off the Diego Ramirez.

It must have been the shock that brought me to my senses, for, as I sank down, dragged lower by the shot at my feet, I felt my feeling and action return. At the same moment my right hand, released from its dread inertia, grasped what I instantly knew to be a knife. Mechanically I forced open the blade and ripped my canvas shroud, so that the shot fell and I began to rise to the surface. In a few seconds, I suppose, although it seemed years, I opened my eyes—for it is a curious fact that while I lay in a state of coma they remained open, yet when my feelings returned with the shock I closed them at once—and saw once more the light of day, which I had never expected to see again.

I was an excellent swimmer, and had soon regained my breath and cast from me the canvas which impeded my movements. Then I looked round over the waters, and saw that my miraculous escape had been all for nothing. The ship, looking like a great swan, was far away, getting smaller and smaller even as I looked.

I noticed a piece of wreckage floating toward me. Hope once more filled my breast, and I swam toward the piece of deck-house, as it proved to be, and, clambering on top, threw myself on my face and wept for very wretchedness.

Alone on the wide ocean, a piece of wood the only thing between me and death, dazed and weak from my last terrible experience, what else could I do but weep? Soon I began to feel an intense hunger.

The thick mist that suddenly came down satisfied my thirst, but there was nothing to eat. I nearly went crazy as the day wore on.

At last night fell and added the terror of the blackness of darkness to the pangs of hunger. I could never tell the horrors of that first night. It was a wonder I was not stark, staring mad when day broke. The second day passed like the first. Nothing to eat, something to moisten my lips, but no sail in sight.

The third day broke with an angry sky and angrier sea, and I saw that before the day closed a Cape Horn gale would be raging with its attendant sleet and cold. I trembled then, for, even though I was almost dead and quite without hope, I wanted to live. By noon the sea had risen tremendously, and it was with great difficulty that I managed to keep on my raft.

By nightfall the gale was raging fiercely, and I was expecting every moment to be engulfed in one of the terrible abysses into which my raft slipped constantly. This was the most awful night I ever spent—worse even than when I lay, to all appearances, dead on the cabin table. The great waves rolled their crested, phosphorescent heads high above me, who, sunk in a black abyss, heard the gale shrieking overhead. I felt soon that it could not last much longer. Numbed and weak as I was, I clung to my refuge with the energy of desperation, and waited bitterly for death.

Finally an immense wave, higher than all that had gone before, raised its wild head and rolled down on me. My time had come. I was swept like a child from my raft, and carried on the crest of the monster, as I supposed, to death. But once again the hand of the Almighty was stretched out to save me. I was dashed with inconceivable violence against something solid as a rock. Ropes were floating all around me; I grabbed several and then swooned.

I woke and recognized the old hospital of the ship. Then I thought my burial and subsequent adventures were all a wandering fancy, and that I had never left the hospital. But I was soon undeceived. A kind face bent over me, and I saw once more the features of my good captain. He would not permit me to speak all that day, but on the next I was allowed to relate my story, which I did in a weak and quavering voice, I can assure you.

Then the captain told me that, after burying me, as they thought, they had kept on their course for two days, when they encountered a heavy gale, which drove them back on their course again. They shipped a terrible sea, which carried away boats and deck-houses, but it was the last exertion of the gale, for after that it died away.

When the waist was sufficiently clear of water to enable the men to walk there, they had discovered my body entangled in ropes lying in the lee scupper. At first they thought my corpse had been washed aboard again, but on lifting me up they saw unmistakable signs of life, and with great awe and wonder carried me into the cabin.

As to my comatose sleep, the captain said he had never seen anything more like death. He had doubted if the most skilful doctors could have discovered any life in me. He was confident my neck had been broken.

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